

Introduction

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Each issue of *Public* is devoted to exploring a theme from a variety of disciplinary perspectives and cultural practices. This issue is devoted to LIGHT, perhaps one of the broadest themes in the journal's ten year history. Given that we both teach cinema and popular culture studies, the theme had very specific connotations for us. Why does the word occupy such a privileged position across so many cultures: one of truth, freedom, and spirituality? How have Enlightenment ideas of rational illumination come to inform the conceptualization of lighting in architecture, painting, theatre, and photography? How has LIGHT developed as a technology aimed at policing movement, at breaking down the boundaries between the public and the private, making the darkest recesses of the lifeworld transparent--a positivism that, as Hannah Arendt once noted, has had detrimental effects on privacy, the imagination, and freedom in the twentieth century. What kinds of power relations, epistemologies and mythologies continue to be reinforced by the simplistic yet forceful binaries of darkness and light?

These are unwieldy questions. We focussed our theme to include essays that engage with the changing significations of LIGHT as both metaphor and technology since the sixteenth century. Without wanting to reduce the historical complexity of these changes, we found it practical to locate the theme in relation to what the Frankfurt School theorists have called the 'dialectic of Enlightenment'. In effect, this dialectic can be seen in the changing values associated with 'light culture'. In nineteenth-century England, the literary critic Matthew Arnold defined high culture in opposition to the forces of modernisation as 'sweetness and light'. A firm believer in Enlightenment axioms, Arnold defines a culture that must rise above the burdens of civilization (democracy and equality) if the world is to progress. A little over a century later, light or 'lite' culture includes everything from stars, easy listening music, tv comedies to beer and microwave food. Lite culture stands in opposition to modernism, to anything as heavy as Art. Lite culture is distraction, promising that loss of self that for some is potentially emancipatory, and for others evidence of the subjugation of the imagination to the enchantments of mass culture.

While the movement from Light to Lite marks the familiar hierarchies of high and low culture, we wouldn't want to reduce it to a capitalist reflex. It is much more interesting. This issue of *Public* seeks to examine the uses of LIGHT in modernism, war, cinema, DNA imaging, reproductive technologies and television comedy. Our aim is to think about the contradictions and aesthetic contingencies produced by LIGHT. As with each issue of the journal, we hope that the juxtaposition of artists' projects, poetry and fiction, along with historical and theoretical essays will cast some useful shadows on our topic.