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## Light and Lighting Methodologies

6<sup>th</sup> ESRC Seminar by Configuring Light/Staging the Social

**Reflections by Joanne Entwistle**

The sixth Configuring Light seminar took place at LSE on 3 March 2016 at the London School of Economics and focused on the theme of Methodologies. The aim of the session was to explore different methodologies and approaches for understanding light within the social world. Speakers included Tim Edensor (Manchester Metropolitan University), Don Slater (LSE), David Moats (Goldsmiths College) and Mark Feighery and Simone Pagani (GIA).

Don Slater from LSE and a founder of Configuring Light opened the afternoon by providing an overview of some of the issues and problems on research lighting as a social material and practice. His paper drew on his now extensive experience doing research on light, as a member of CL. He expressed the problems with researching lighting in terms of five prevalent themes. Perhaps most pertinent to our discussion was the need to make light visible in order to make it researchable. Since light is subliminal much of the time, he argued we need sensory and material methods to stimulate discussion. He urged the need to be pragmatic and inventive about methods and draw on a range of different tools. At a time of growing awareness of light, the need for more sophisticated social research is growing that can support other kinds of information routinely gathered (consultations, participatory design, for example). Moreover, with the coming of LED and 'smart' technologies to gather 'big data', there is an urgent need for social research that gives 'thick description' of the ways in which people live with, and understand, light. These themes set the stage very well for the papers that followed and the proceeding discussion.



Some of Don's themes came up in the second paper by Mark Feighley and Simone Pagani, both partners at structural engineering company Gia. They discussed their ongoing research on daylighting and the right to light. Daylighting is a huge issue in many large developed cities as the need to maximise land grows more urgent and density becomes a big issue in expanding cities. The analysis that GIA provides for clients provides a real world demonstration of the ways in which light has to be contextualised to be meaningful (echoing Don's call for 'thick description' perhaps). As Mark and Simone argued, the BRE guidance is a crude 'one size fits all' tool that doesn't attend to the complexities of people's relationships to the built environment. Using beautiful visualisations gathered from their research, Mark and Simone showed how older buildings in central London 'break' the guidance rules yet remain desirable and valuable places to live with sufficient daylight. They argued that analysis of light needs should take into account issues of value beyond simple measurements of light through windows.

David Moats from Goldsmiths College then gave a fascinating paper that developed themes from both of the earlier two papers. His focus was not light specifically, but how we might analyse big data. With some impressive and beautiful graphs he developed as part of his doctoral research, he questioned simplistic interpretations of big data and showed how important it is to qualify the quantified numbers gathered. His focus on online social controversies offered very clear insight into the problem of simply reading the data as evidence of some measurable aspect of the controversy when it might tell us much more about the ways people use social media to share information on the controversy. Thus, he argued, there is the inevitable effect that the data generates its own phenomenon not connected to the original problem or issue it appears to track. He ended with some reflections about light, reminding us that if we think about big data and light, it can be useful to study controversies, events and problems and contextualise a particular reading with other data as well. With the increasing potential of light to generate big data on, for example, footfall, there is an urgent need to look behind and beyond these raw numbers and question not just 'how many/much' but look to understand who, why, what happens on the street.

As a result of some last minute changes in our programme, the second and final session of the afternoon was a talk from Tim Edensor followed by a longer discussion. Edensor's paper took us through his various research projects that have focused on different aspects of light and drawn on different methodologies. These different projects all involve exploring what we might think of as exceptional experiences of light and darkness and drew on different methodologies. He began with a vignette of an interview-based project on a restaurant in London where the guests are invited to sample an alternative menu which involves eating in the dark. The experience sets in sharp relief the importance of light for understanding many simple things like food (without light people can't identify what they are eating). His analysis of Blackpool lights is similarly concerned with a rather spectacular lighting experience which again demonstrates the power of light in shaping our experience. Another interview project on Blackpool illustrated how the lights can stimulate the public and make them more responsive to light and aware of its potential - as quotes from his respondents illustrate. His analysis of walking in a designated dark park with his son drew on autoethnography (there were no people around to interview as it was too dark) also show how the absence of 'ordinary' lighting, throws up how dependent we are on light and lighting. He ended by discussing some of the foremost artists working with light today and how their work also allows us to think with light and lighting.



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In many ways, Tim's paper returned us to some of Don's points about how to make light visible and what methodologies we might employ to understand this ubiquitous element. His work on the less ordinary experiences of light goes – in part – to answering Don's call for methodologies to make light visible. Where Don – and indeed all of CL's work – has been attending to 'ordinary' and 'routine' light and encountering many methodological problems, Edensor's attention to the space and places that are outside the norm evidence it. The discussion focused also on how to use methods that might be dramatic or inventive (interventions, events, guerrilla lighting) in real world settings to engage the public and policy makers to think about light.

The afternoon was, as usual, lively and enjoyable. We look forward to the remaining three seminars and more stimulating discussion.



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