

Encountering Light and Dark in Tourism: An Interview with Tim Edensor

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The Great American Solar Eclipse that took place last August 21st generated an extraordinary level of excitement and marvel, with “eclipse tourists” traveling great distances and spending millions of dollars from Oregon to South Carolina to be in the “path of totality” at the crucial moment when the moon would occult the sun entirely, making it possible for them to see stars in the middle of the day. Aside from the media hype that without a doubt created part of the momentum for the event, there was something special to be experienced and people sensed it. Perhaps it is as simple as wanting to experience “darkness,” a feeling from which we feel estranged because we are constantly subjected to an abundance of light clutter in our lives. How and where might people seek out darkness? Tim Edensor, who for the last decade has studied how dark and light shape how people apprehend landscapes, provided some answers as he discussed with me his research in various darkness tourism sites and the triangular relationship between dark, light, and illumination. Many factors influence the ways in which visitors experience tourism sites. Light and dark are some of those factors that inescapably affect people’s interaction with the world and their engagement with special and familiar places. However, they are sometimes taken for granted as they are so evident and ubiquitous that they become unnoticed. This captivating conversation opens our eyes to the visible glows we may have missed in our encounters with nightscapes.

—*Hélène Ducros for EuropeNow*

EuropeNow How did you become interested in landscapes of darkness and illumination?

Tim Edensor There is a very clear start for me: In 2008, in Manchester, in northwest England. A friend and I noticed that many working class and low quality housing at Christmas time had lots of Christmas lights. We thought it brought a certain type of festivity to the landscape and the atmosphere. We investigated it and thought we would write about it. We interviewed the households that had lights on their houses. One of the first things we found out is that there was a lot of anger about these Christmas lights. At first we could not understand why people were getting angry over festive forms of illumination. But what it really revealed were middle class concerns. The middle class was upset that people were competitive in the way they displayed lights, that it was unsustainable, bad for the environment. These people displaying lights were accused of probably being on welfare benefits, maybe drug addicts, with lots of children. All these types of assertions were made in

association with claims that the householders were displaying “bad taste.” But the households were not interested in displaying good taste. Rather, they were interested in producing festive and seasonal landscapes and affects that would make their community feel happy.

Nearly nothing at all had been written by geographers about lights, dark, and illumination. It is amazing because as geographers we are interested in space, place, landscape, and all these things are conditioned and shaped by the light, the darkness, and the illuminations that fall upon them. Yet there had not been a discussion about it. I was intimidated by the subject, but nevertheless thought I had to explore it and I am happy that I did.

EuropeNow What is the relationship between light and darkness in nightscapes?

Tim Edensor The first thing to say is that we forget how dark the night used to be before electric lighting and illumination. The relationship has changed since the world was predominantly dark 200 years ago, when even very wealthy people only used oil lamps. When it first arrived, whether gas or electric, light was absolutely revolutionary. Think about how magical it must have been. It must have been extraordinary in the way it transformed space, especially in the city: the shimmers, the glow of light, and the ways in which some areas were dark and others were light. It must have been phantasmagorical. We have become used to it now. Today, if we think about the relationship between light and dark we might say that where dark used to be pre-eminent for most of us, now the light is a kind of imperialistic force that glows everywhere. It vanishes darkness. The relation between light and dark has gone too far in favor of light and we are losing the qualities of darkness with which we used to be so familiar. Moreover, effective, aesthetic, and beautiful lighting also gets lost. In this general illuminated ambiance, because things are so bright, interesting and innovative forms of lighting do not stand out any longer either. Some people are well aware of this and this is why they call for less lighting in the streets.

EuropeNow Increasingly, localities are trying to attract visitors with light shows and light festivals. What is the role of luminosity in light/darkness tourism?

Tim Edensor I would say two things about the ways illumination attracts tourism. First, on a modest level, many cities are increasingly concerned with place making. In recent times, light has become a quite profound resource with which to make places. An interesting development in terms of illuminations is that they are not necessarily meant to attract international tourists or large numbers of tourists from outside the city, but to produce public spaces that are interesting, captivating, and mysterious. Different kinds of artistic installations have been set up in cities across the world. One I was particularly drawn to is Chris Burden’s *Urban Light* at the LACMA, a stunning piece of illuminated art. He brought over one hundred street lamps of different styles that were used in the early twentieth century throughout southern California and he assembled them into a large gridded pattern. It has produced a new public space in Los Angeles, a city that is notorious for having few public spaces and for being dominated by cars. He created a luminous space that people now flock to at night.

People take wedding photos there. There are fashion shoots. Tourists stop there. This is one interesting way in which tourism can be enhanced by subtle artistic installations that are permanent.

We can then think of less permanent uses of illumination like light festivals. The growth of light festivals across the western world has accelerated enormously in the last two decades. There are light festivals of various scales and sizes. Some are very large, such as the *Fête des Lumières* in Lyon (France) that lasts four nights and attracts an extraordinary four million people to its streets. It is a city-wide festival in which a plethora of different forms of light installations – projections, sculptures – are arranged across the city. It has been a fascinating and successful experiment. Not only has it drawn in millions of tourists, but it has helped Lyon think about how it might reconstitute the lighting design of the whole city. Very large shows like the *Fête des Lumières* can be quite captivating. Some people critique these by saying that this is the society of the spectacle, drawing on Debord's notion that people behold these overwhelming visual features in a very passive fashion. They stand there inertly, or maybe film the event on a mobile phone. This is not a critique that I share very much. These huge spectacles, like many other forms of light installations, defamiliarize space. They make space feel special, extraordinary, and unusual for a short period of time. I think large festivals have a greater similarity between them. With the way light festivals are rolled out across the world, we can certainly see similarities in design, with light artists installing similar things in different places. The challenge will be to maintain the levels of innovation we have seen in the last twenty years. That may be possible with the rise of new digital technologies.

The second festival I would like to talk about in terms of its appeal to tourism is the *Vivid Festival* in Sydney. It is also a huge festival that attracts hundreds of thousands of people to the streets of central Sydney in late May-early June. What is interesting about it is that there are also spectacles, such as the famous Opera House that is probably the most prestigious canvas in the world upon which to project light forms. With the addition of light projected onto it, this already amazing spectacle compounds an already existing tourist site and reenchants it. Another interesting thing about the Sydney festival is that many of the installations are interactive. Places that can be very quiet during the winter are transformed by displays with which people interact in a whole range of ways. They can pull on ropes to activate light patterns, they can dance on illuminated surfaces, they can shout to trigger illumination. This creates a fantastic atmosphere. It is also very inclusive. All kinds of ethnicities mingle to create this public space in marvelous ways with light. This is attractive to tourists who not only want to look at things but also want to engage in the world in new and interesting ways.

The third example I would like to talk about is the *Blackpool Illuminations*, situated at the world's first working class seaside resort in the Northwest of England. It remains quite popular, attracting three or four million people each year. Since the 1920s, there has been a 6-mile stretch of illumination along the seafront. Light can enchant and transform space. What is interesting here is that people do not go there to necessarily see the most

technologically advanced display, design or installation. What most go there for is to experience a certain kind of nostalgia. Families go year upon year. Grandparents take their grandchildren to witness this old-fashion illumination that plays along the seafront. This is a different type of tourism, one more associated with conviviality, nostalgia, and family. Like the *Vivid Festival*, it has also produced a profound atmosphere. This kind of atmosphere is co-produced by the lights, the darkness, and the visitors who are there.

In addition to these huge-scale festivals like the *Fête des Lumières* or *Vivid*, there is an abundance of very small local festivals. I did research on a small festival in West Yorkshire in the town of Slaithwaite. This is a small community-oriented festival, not an international festival, but rather one that attracts many local tourists. There are many local festivals like this one. We should not ignore that they also play a role in producing a sense of place, a sense of community, and a sense of occasion. And they also attract people from the region. In the last few weeks, I have been looking at another small-scale festival in Melbourne. It is the *Gertrude Street Projection Festival*, a festival preoccupied with projection art, but not generally the large-scale projections we might see in large festivals. There are thirty to forty displays along the street that display the diversity of projection art. It is an artist-led event rather than a city promotional event. It lasts for ten days and also draws in many local Melbourne residents to witness it. It transforms the street, making it very unusual. Light has the eternal capacity to defamiliarize space. For instance, projection can make buildings appear to melt, or to crumble, or it can highlight certain architectural features that we may not have seen before. It can bring images, ideas, and words from other times and places. It takes us elsewhere, creating strange worlds and making architecture unusual. Projections can also bring out forgotten histories. They can have an important practical role in reminding us of things that have been forgotten. So, there is great diversity of festivals of illumination at both small-scale and large-scale.

EuropeNow Do you see a risk that darkness itself become a commodity?

Tim Edensor One of the things that people say about festivals of all types, not just light and dark attractions, is that they are part of the neo-liberal commodification of place. Place and history become commodified and tourism plays a role. There is some truth to that. Places can be commodified for the tourism market. But because there are multiple ways of representing a place, the superficial or simplistic notion that there is only one accepted way does not seem right. In light projections, light can be used to enhance architectural forms, it can make you aware of building façades in a way that would not be possible by daylight. It can also show you features at the top of the roof that you would not be able to see during the day. So, at night, you get a sense of the architecture. It can bring out landscapes and sculptural forms in ways that cannot be apprehended during daylight. In that way, it can look at different histories. In Sydney, there was an illuminated installation that displayed forms with easy to read references to Aboriginal history. So, a geographical display can also

contain political messages. We have to be careful about simplistic notions of place promotion. There are many creative things that light can do, sometimes bringing to notice the overlooked history of place.

EuropeNow What are some examples of darkness tourism experiences you have researched and find most interesting? In this movement of revaluing darkness over light, what needs do you think tourists fulfill in the experience of the absence of light?

Tim Edensor Darkness fulfills various needs. The biggest innovation in darkness tourism is the creation of *Dark Sky Parks*. A great number have been founded especially in North America and Europe, although they exist also in other parts of the world. The motivation was that there was so much light being projected from cities that you could no longer see the stars. Initially, it was part of what you might call “celestial tourism,” which attracted “astronomical tourists,” or tourists-astronomers, who wanted to look at the stars and the galaxies. The creation of dark parks made that possible. But these sites have come to attract other kinds of people who are not necessarily overly interested in seeing the stars, but also want to walk in a dark landscape at night. This refers back to my suggestion that because the world is so bright, darkness is mostly an unfamiliar condition. The problem is that due to Christian and subsequently Enlightenment thought, darkness has been seen as the realm of Satan and the devil, the setting for all evil creatures, ghosts, and monsters. The pre-Enlightened era of darkness is construed as the realm of abjection of ignorance and backwardness. Accordingly, illumination has become a key sign of modernity and darkness has become unfamiliar. For this reason, there have been a number of tourist attractions that play on this desire to experience darkness, but in different ways.

When walking or cycling through a dark sky landscape, people see it differently. They get a different sense of it. They cannot see much – perhaps silhouettes of trees, the shimmers of rivers, shadowy shapes, and different tones of grey. People also talk about how their other senses, beyond the visual, become activated. This is important because one significant tourist theory is John Urry’s “tourist gaze,” through which he considers tourism to be overwhelmingly visual. It is about taking photographs and consuming heritage and spectacle visually. I think this is a mistake. Clearly the visual is very important in tourism, but so are other senses. There is an array of emerging forms of tourism that try to appeal to the non-visual, darkness tourism being one of them. When you voyage into darkness, you start to hear things in a way that you would not normally perceive sounds, like fluttering birds, wind in the trees, and all sorts of curious animal noises. You do not know what they are, but you become more attuned to auditory sensations. You can say the same thing about smell and touch. These senses come to the fore, providing an intensified engagement with the world. This is what certain kinds of tourism try to offer, an intensification of sensations that move us away from our ordinary encounter with the world.

Besides these dark parks, there are other tourist attractions. I will mention three. First of all, there are dark restaurants where you can go eat in complete darkness. I and a colleague carried out a little project in *Dans le Noir*, a restaurant in London. The first thing that people

told us was “we did not know it was going to be so dark!” Even though they knew they were going to eat in a dark restaurant, they could not envisage that that kind of darkness existed. They just imagined it would be gloomy. Then people talked about how eating in the dark generated different kinds of sensations and obviously how the flavors of the food were intensified when they were not able to see what it was. Because most diners opted for a surprise menu, they did not know what they were eating. Many people were outraged that they could not identify very common foods like rhubarb, asparagus, or mushrooms. You would think they would, but because they could not see, it was difficult to identify the foods. So it provided a novel sensory experience. People also talked about the fact that in the dark they ate without worrying about what they looked like. Strangers sitting at the same table would talk to each other in ways that generated much more intimacy and conviviality. They argued that this was because no judgements were being made about the way people looked or ate since they only had their voices to go on. They found this quite liberating. This is one aspect of darkness. Darkness transforms the world. It narrows it down by creating new sorts of convivialities and intimacies.

A second example I would like to mention is a fascinating experiment in New York called *Dialogue in the Dark*. The idea is that it is supposed to elicit greater empathy for what it means to be blind by experiencing a simulated New York in complete darkness. For me it did not really do that. You go to a little chamber that is lighted, and then the light fails. You are given a stick. Then you walk through four different realms: “Central Park,” “Times Square,” the “Subway,” and the “supermarket.” You cannot see anything but you have a blind guide to guide you through the areas, and make you attend to the noises, the textures, the smells, and the feel of things. For instance in the supermarket, you could feel the vegetables and identify what they were. It gives you a renewed understanding of how touch informs us and how we come to know the world. I found “Times Square” quite perturbing because there was so much noise there. Our guide suggested that she was able to pick out different noises and sounds and know where they were coming from. But to me, it was just a huge and overwhelming noise. That aspect of darkness once more acted to defamiliarize the familiar world. I know places like Times Square, the Subway, and Central Park quite well. But in the dark, in absence of any vision, all the senses were stimulated. It was an interesting and exciting tourist experience, even though it was not meant as such.

The last example I would like to talk about is different. It is in Queenstown, in Southern New Zealand, a site for adventure tourism where thousands of young people go for kayaking, white water rafting, bungee jumping, all sorts of things. It is like the capital of the world for adventure tourism. There is a tourist attraction called the *Fear Factory*, which is a dark spooky walk. You walk in complete darkness along a narrow corridor for fifteen minutes following only a very dim light in the ceiling. As you work your way through the attraction, all sorts of things, spirits and ghosts, attack you, pull on your clothes, or whisper in your ears, and sometimes a grisly face appears in a flash in front of you for a brief moment. It is terrifying but also hugely entertaining. People laugh. And then you come out. What is

interesting is that it plays on the imaginary associations with darkness in contemporary ways, drawing on the old notion of darkness as the realm of terror. You are terrified but also entertained.

These are only three examples, but there are also dark concerts, dark plays, dark cycle rides, and a whole plethora of attractions that are emerging as a response to the absence of darkness as a condition that allows us to undergo a range of experiences that are unfamiliar to us, heightening sensations and defamiliarizing the experience of place. It is the absence of darkness that has led to this demand and the success of these emerging tourist attractions.

EuropeNow In your writings you speak of “nyctophobia” and “nocturnal demi-monde” as ways people relate to darkness. Can you explain what you mean?

Tim Edensor In old times, most people were terrified of darkness partly because of those Christian associations of darkness with the devil, as well as all sorts of superstitions and popular imaginations. People would go out after dark and see strange forms of lighting, sometimes natural phenomena, but they would interpret them as supernatural. Later, with the city, it was more about the human terrors, the muggers, the rapists, the criminals waiting in dark alleys. The assumption that danger lurks where darkness prevails is still with us. However, while this remains the dominant version about what darkness constitutes, there has always been less fearful engagement with darkness. For example, certain medieval Christian sects sought out darkness. They found solace in caves, with no light at all, without any kind of visual or sensory distractions, so they could concentrate on the mystery of God, meditate, and access God in an unmediated way. So, it is not as simple as to say that people have always feared dark. Some people have not. And since the emergence of cities, there has always been a demi-monde: people who were drawn to darkness for all sorts of reasons. Beside common criminals, there were revolutionaries and seditionaries who found in darkness a place to escape, whether it was to escape the surveillance of a master, the authorities, or the police, to find places where they cannot be seen. African Americans slaves used to congregate in the dark as well, for social interaction without the surveillance of the slave owning class. Those in power tend to want to see people at all times and conceive of darkness as a threat to their rule. So, it is complex and ambiguous. You cannot say that darkness has always been feared. Dark attractions have always existed, like ghost fairs, even the cinema and the dark auditorium.

EuropeNow You also speak of illuminations producing “thick atmosphere.” How do you define that? What opportunities do you think reconnecting with darkness/light produces for the touristic experience?

Tim Edensor The notion of atmosphere has emerged in recent times in social science and geographic thought. One thing about light is that it is not purely symbolic because we experience light in sensory and affective ways. Light has a glow and that is what we notice. It extends beyond representation to trigger different kinds of moods and feelings. In terms of light festivals, we might think about how their creators design atmosphere by using different

levels of luminosity and providing particular sensory and affective impressions. We cannot disregard the way in which people manipulate atmosphere. The other important thing is that atmospheres are co-produced by the people who are in that space. In light festivals, people might congregate around a particular installation, sometimes small intimate displays, in turn drawing more people to look. It creates a kind of atmosphere around the light display to which people, but also light and background noises, contribute. Light is an ingredient of atmosphere and contributes to a sense of excitement, for example in the city, when people go to a concert, or clubbing. We might also mention the condition in Denmark called *Hygge*, loosely translated as “coziness.” People seek a sense of intimacy and conviviality. They light candles and create illuminations around which people gather. You could call it a designed experiential space. The soft glow produces atmosphere and changes the surroundings.

EuropeNow What disciplinary approaches and methods do you think are most apt at addressing nocturnal experiences in tourism/leisure?

Tim Edensor Any research into light must use multiple forms of research techniques and approaches: auto-ethnographies, photo-elicitation, participant observation, video recording, talking to artists who make light design. There is no wrong way of exploring light. And it has to be multidisciplinary. I mentioned to you earlier that there was very little written in social science about darkness, light, and illumination. As a geographer, that was difficult for me. What I had to do, for example in my most recent book *From Light to Dark* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), is to feature many descriptions of artists’ works. It was the way they play with daylight, darkness, and illumination that helped me think through and grasp the particular conditions of darkness. I had to go beyond geography into areas of art, art history, philosophy, science, and optics. I had to do this out of necessity because there was so little written in my own discipline. But any singular disciplinary approach to light simply cannot work or it would be very reductive.

To conclude, I would say that as we speak about darkness and illumination, we also should speak about daylight and the ways in which it absolutely transforms our experience of space. Having come to Melbourne in the summer from the United Kingdom, I have been astounded by the luminosity and the absence of water or dust particles in the atmosphere, and the way daylight falls upon different elements in the landscape. The distinctive quality of any landscape has a lot to do with the quality of this luminous light but also what it falls upon, how the elements in the landscape absorb and reflect the light, whether they are grassy or rocky materialities. This is a fundamental elemental question that has not been explored in great detail and one that I would like to pursue in future research.

Tim Edensor teaches Cultural Geography at Manchester Metropolitan University and is currently a visiting scholar at Melbourne University. He is the author of *Tourists at the Taj* (Routledge, 1998), *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (Berg, 2002) and *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality* (Berg, 2005), as well as the editor of

Geographies of Rhythm (2010). His most recent book, *from Light to Dark: Daylight, Illumination and Gloom* was published earlier this year by Minnesota University Press. Tim has written extensively on national identity, tourism, ruins and urban materiality, mobilities and landscapes of illumination and darkness.

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