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## The Symbolic Quest Behind Today's Cities of Light— and its Unintended Ecological Consequences

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### Abstract

The symbol of light has commonly represented human desires for goodness, order, truth, perpetual abundance, and the transcendence of earthly limits. Modern practices of artificial light cultivation remain associated with a symbolic promise to banish darkness and its corollaries—lack, death, ignorance, disease, and chaos. In today's global and increasingly urbanized world this association is most notably emblemized in the modern city, which is lit up at night in a technologically brilliant display that ironically also conveys the deepening ecological disaster of anthropogenic climate change. Responding to German philosopher Hans Blumenberg's essay 'Light as a Metaphor for Truth', this article seeks to uncover the ways that technological figurations of light transform an ancient association with freedom into dangerous practices of fuel fetish and over-consumption. Increased awareness of such habits of over-consumption could help to decrease urban light pollution and the ecological danger that it signifies.

### Keywords

Light, symbol, ecological crisis, fuel fetish, directed attention, over-consumption, transcendence



Figure 1. Photomontage courtesy NASA (2003)

The modern city not only represents a remarkable technological achievement; it also reveals a deeply symbolic quest, which is suggested in the light it exudes at night, as can be seen in the famous NASA photomontage. This quest responds to a persistent human yearning to 'live in the light', a state commonly associated with truth, goodness, order, knowledge, power, and abundance. By association with such perennially meaningful ideas, the symbol of light has achieved lasting cultural status. Light operates as a pre-eminent vehicle of persistent mythic power because the qualities of both light and myth are similar: they are materially manifest (or physically 'real'), while concurrently transcendent of any definitive form or containment. German philosopher Hans Blumenberg claimed that light operates as a metaphor for the history of human self-conception so closely that 'transformations of the basic metaphor indicate changes in world-understanding and self-understanding' (Blumenberg 1993: 31). After tracing the way light is associated with freedom in much ancient philosophical and religious speculation, Blumenberg suggested that a technological figuration has come to invade the metaphors of light such that it now illuminates self-interest rather than the hope for freedom (1993: 53-54). In fact, he even questioned whether light could still be said to operate as a metaphor for freedom at all (1993: 55 n. 5). Responding to these concerns, I intend to show that ancient ideals linking light with prestige and abundance are materialized in today's cities in a conflagration of human self-interest—and at great ecological cost.

Blumenberg pointed out that traditional myths and metaphors of light commonly supposed a dualism that is overcome in effulgent transcendence; that light battled darkness but then offered itself in complete

victory, above and beyond opposition (1993: 32). Light often symbolizes transcendence as well as goodness, its ethereality suggesting that the limits and difficulties of earthbound existence, along with the threats of death and disease and disorder, can be overcome. Its power is perennial because, even as it is consistently constructed as a combatant in an endless conflict with inimical forces of darkness, it ultimately transcends antagonism in a final, complete victory. The dominant Western terms of the worldly dualism that must initially be tackled before transcendence can be assured typically associate light with the masculine, mind, heaven, action, justice, knowledge, and order as they stand over the darkness of the passive, the body, earth, debasement, chaos, and the unconscious or inert feminine (Berry 2010b; Merchant 2003; Westling 1996). Since the beginning of large-scale settlement civilizations, these powerful assumptions have been employed in symbols and narratives that work to support dominant paradigms of production and consumption. Such modes are very often associated with ideals of technological evolution towards greater mastery over the earth. The transcendent state promised as the culmination of this trajectory is a paradise of endless consumption made possible by the victory of artificial light in its engagement with the threats and dangers both within and without the city. Hence, in terms of twenty-first-century global civilization, the figure of light fulfils its traditional dual role as an agent of totalization by representing victory over darkness and the transcendence of this conflict concurrently.

Of course, there also exist many counter-narratives that challenge conventional valences by accepting or reversing them, so that the culture/light pole is disparaged while the nature/darkness pole is venerated, or that propose models with alternative valences altogether. While such possibilities would make a worthy study in their own right, I set out here to critique the way that today's cities of light physically manifest a symbolic quest to overwhelm darkness; a quest that becomes correlated with anthropogenic climate change through association with habits of over-consumption and the dangerous, profiteering dream of continued growth.

The relatively recent spread of electric light across the planet naturally brings many material benefits; yet the associated ecological and spiritual costs generally go unrecognized. Artificial illumination of the city offers measures of safety, security, and guidance, but, when lit unnecessarily at night, it is also responsible for needless carbon pollution. Resistance to dimming the nightly display of electric light reveals the way it is also associated with increased levels of abundance and consumption (Fouquet 2012). The dominant paradigm of modern electric light thus maintains

and transforms an ancient and dangerous dualism. This dualism equates darkness with the lack identified in the rest of a 'nature' that can in turn be eclipsed by the brilliance and mastery of human technologies. Ironically, in an era when the capacity for ecosystemic damage has become more immediate and disastrous than ever, the dream of perpetual light may actually reveal, in its shadow, exactly the establishment of the chaotic darkness and disorder it was originally designed to overcome. A brief overview of the relationship between political organization, techno-scientific evolution, and the worship of light will give historical context to the current manifestation of this mythic complex and the self-defeating symbolic quest it perpetuates.

### *Historical Context*

#### *Sun-Gods and the Rise of Universal Power: Mesopotamia and Rome*

A state of almost permanent warfare among Mesopotamian city-states in the third millennium BCE resulted in the emergence of the sun-king, who would fight ongoing battles on behalf of his people. The new requirement during this era for a sovereign military leader meant a permanent position was created (Kramer 1969: 35) that was even considered 'the very hallmark of civilization' (Kramer 1970: 74). While a wide-ranging pantheon continued to exist, many powerful leaders of the time began to aggrandize their rule as kings 'of the four quarters of the universe', a phrase closely associated with the universal authority indicated by solar regency (Campion 1994: 88-90). Sun-kings such as Sargon of Akkad (2334–2279 BCE), one of the most famous monarchs of the third millennium, his son and successor, Naram-Sin, and Shulgi, King of Ur (2094–2047 BCE), used the title to associate themselves with the sun's power over all the lands, aggressively pursuing their inheritance of such 'divine' authority (Campion 1994: 88-90). Other historical developments shaping the Mesopotamian focus on solar deities include the fact that Elamite and Amorite invaders both conquered Sumerian city-states under the standard of their own sun-gods, which would have inspired fervent intercultural loyalty, as a solar deity was credited with military success no matter who won the battle (Mackenzie 2004 [1915]: 240-41). By the time the later Babylonian sun-god Marduk defeated the feminine chaos monster Tiamat—the harbinger of darkness—he was imagined as a saviour cloaked in light (Jacobsen 1968).

The figure of light represented the consistency and absolute power of the sun-god, as well as the universal law and order, peace, and prosperity promised by the sun-king. As Babylon cemented the urbanizing tendencies of ancient Sumer, so the metaphorical connection of sunlight

with goodness was also extended. Ashurbanipal (reigned 668–627 BCE), famous for his library, claimed in his 'Hymn to the Sun-God' that the destroyer of evil 'above and below' cast its rays down 'like a net' over the lands, sending 'frightful brilliance' into every corner of the world (Pritchard 1969: 387-89, i: ll. 4-5 and l. 48). Yet veneration of light as a destroyer of darkness was not only an urban phenomenon; in fact, possibly the strongest version of this dualism to have existed arrived with Zoroastrianism, which rose *against* a background of urban technological development during the Bronze Age (Boyce 2001: xv). Although the influence of Zoroastrianism on dominant ideologies of light worship may be indirect, another dualistic model, the Manichaeist doctrine, is instilled into medieval Christianity via Augustine's spiritual inclinations (van Oort 1998: 37-47). Discussion of the way metaphysical speculation can be aligned with the light symbolism of a dominant world order must now lead us to consider the Roman Empire and some of its enduring legacies.

The Mesopotamians always maintained their other gods and goddesses alongside the sun-god, never seeing fit to dispense with a full pantheon of deities. The idea of absolute solar monotheism arose elsewhere, in the Egyptian heresy of the Pharaoh Akhenaten (ca. 1362 BCE) and in the Roman experiment under Syrian Emperor Elagabalus (ruled 218–222 CE), both of which failed miserably (Halsberghe 1972; Hornung 1999; Ball 2002). While these innovators failed to institutionalize their chosen solar regents as monotheistic deities, Constantine (ruled 306–337 CE) moved to align the late Roman Empire with another God of supreme light that would rule over or erase alternative deities and spirits of nature. The choice of Christianity as the legislative religion of late Rome must rank as one of the most unlikely (and thus unsettling) acts of co-option ever, as an anti-authoritarian mystic tradition, popular with the oppressed and based on a vision of universal love, was reinterpreted to serve the very worldly power of the Eternal City that it set out to condemn. But there are politically comprehensible reasons for this complex passage in history, which are important to the field of ecocriticism. This is because when the symbolic power of light is concentrated into one dominant figure or regime, it tends to stand over and subjugate other forces (such as nature spirits and the places they represent) that are typically given voice in a more broadly conceived spiritual topography.

First, the shift towards more urban, institutionalized cultures such as those of the Romans was often accompanied by worship of a sun-god (whether Christ, Ra, or Mithras) under whom other deities and rites could be subsumed (Roll 1998: 133-34). It is in this sense that Blumenberg reminds us of 'the importance, for the self-understanding of politics in

the age of the Caesars, of Christianity's offer to set the unity of the new God alongside the unity of the empire and the ruler' (Blumenberg 1990: 101). The simultaneous development towards late Classical universalism in both political/economical and psychological/spiritual terms has inherent environmental dangers, however, as has been indicated by several ecocritics. Evan Eisenberg noted that displacement of nature gods commonly accompanies imperialistic expansions, pointing out that Roman urbanization combined profitably with Christianity's universalism in the realm of the spirit (Eisenberg 1998: 117). Thereafter unhindered human use of nature could be sanctioned with recourse to a universal god, who acted 'like an absentee landowner, with no stake in the local landscape', as opposed to local gods (1998: 137). For Robert Pogue Harrison, the denuding of European forests under expanding urban rule extended the dominion of universal law, as the natural buffers between cultural centres, which had 'served to localize the spirit of place', were diminished (Harrison 1992: 51). Likewise, Louise Westling follows Schneidau to see in Christian universalism the Hebrew tendency away from localized, chthonic spirits (Westling 1996: 24-25). Such ideological bias can bolster imperial order against the claims of countryside dwellers and their chthonic spirits, which might otherwise work to support localized practices of earthcare.

Strategically, the prophetic tradition as represented by Christ could be augmented, on behalf of the institution of Christianity, with the kingly tradition also extant in the scriptures. The later papacy could then combine the dominance of their empire with Hebrew prophecy and the dazzling light of Greek philosophy, concurrently consolidating a religion of the people.<sup>1</sup> The Church's dominant sky-god represented, across the passage from late Classicism to medieval Catholicism, centralized power united and magnified into one authority (of both political and religious stripes), the marginalization and demonization of nature spirits, and succour for people's everyday travails in one fell swoop. A god of light could thus promise peaceable order reinforced with military might, universalizing the power and authority of a patriarchal and paternalistic law, which not coincidentally aligned the possibility of prosperity with the colonization of other lands and peoples.

Proving its enduring attractiveness to dominant ideologies of empire, this same combination would be rehashed in US President George W. Bush's dualistic 'War on Terror' rhetoric, which sounded very much like

1. Blumenberg claimed that Philo Judaeus translated the Creation image of the Hebrew Word into 'an image of light emanating into the darkness of matter' in order to make the Old Testament intelligible to Greek culture (1993: 46-47).

the sabre-rattling language found in Dead Sea Scroll 1QM, otherwise known as the 'War Between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness' (Berry 2008). The ideal of transcendental light has also been used more hopefully (although not necessarily with any more consolation for the oppressed or the earth) to represent the sentiment of a heroically shining city on the hill in certain influential American speeches (John Winthrop 1630; President-Elect John F. Kennedy 1961; President Ronald Reagan 1984 and 1989). This tradition, which maintains the association of the American nation with ideals of freedom and even of spiritual leadership, follows Jesus' parable from Matt. 5.14-16: 'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven'. Herein lie both the perennial hope and eclipsing vision that so often accompanies the dominant symbol of light: as Tom Moylan pointed out, Reagan's dream of the 1980s unfolded alongside not only the withdrawal of many platforms of social justice, but ecological travesties that pushed many bioregions 'to the edge of irreversible disaster' (Moylan 2000: 183-84). This paradox results partly because of the conflation between two images of the shining city: the spiritual example of Matthew and the urban paradise of plenitude introduced with the apocalyptic image of the 'New Jerusalem'.

*Urban Light and Undying Plenitude: The New Jerusalem*

The New Jerusalem of Revelations 21–22 represents an influential Western vehicle of the quest for a realm of perpetually abundant light—one that exceeds the vision suggested in Matthew. The resplendent imagery of this city promises eternal luminescence for the faithful: 'And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun; for the Lord God will be their light; and they will reign for ever and ever' (Rev. 22.5). Permanent worship is directly linked with otherworldliness, as God's incandescence graces an urban landscape free of the usual physical sources of light (and lack) on earth. Light's transcendent victory is guaranteed, as expected, with an inbuilt dualism that has already been overcome, according to which those who strayed from the one true God (murderers, idolaters, and the like—presumably including pagan heretics) are exiled beyond the walls of the blessed city (Rev. 22.15).

The Christian vision of an otherworldly city of light in Revelations neatly caps the controversial ideology of 'dominion' set out in Genesis. Lynn White's famous article, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis' (1967), pinpointed the way that dominion could so easily be interpreted to mean domination, rather than the stewardship it can also indicate. White ignited a fruitful debate over the symbolic, religious, and

cultural elements of material practices. In not simplistically condemning Christianity but, rather, critiquing the way it was interpreted on behalf of the drive to subjugate the earth, he showed that dominion as domination has proven a more historically powerful idea than dominion as stewardship. Ecocritic Kate Rigby summed up the ambiguity of any simplistic argument against Christianity as an agent of global ecological damage when she reminded us that 'the period of the greatest despoliation of the earth has coincided precisely with the waning of the earlier theocentric view of nature as God's creation' (Rigby 2002: 156). The creation of the modern city of light comes about when the most ecologically damaging ideological material from both traditions is put to work, combining attitudes of human domination over the earth with unparalleled capacities for such an idea's technological manifestation in a desacralized world.

As Ernest Tuveson showed in *Millennium and Utopia*, imagery of the New Jerusalem retained a deep influence on early modern thinkers, who no longer accepted the medieval notion of an irredeemably fallen world but saw instead the possibility of creating heaven on earth. Influential seventeenth-century thinkers followed eminent Cambridge biblical scholar Joseph Mede to assert that the future would represent a step of 'spiritual progression', in which 'humanity is to be again in Eden' (Tuveson 1972: 84). Henry More, a successor of Mede's at Cambridge, helped to cement the idea that the Fall could be part of a divine plan and that 'the advance of civilization' may constitute humanity's salvation (1972: 97). Importantly, earthly as well as human nature was to be redeemed in this shift, such that scientific study could even reveal 'the divine Being itself' (1972: 102). In this manner, the idea of the New Jerusalem moved from one of world negation towards the ideal of world reform: 'The destined goal of humanity, succeeding generations were to believe [was] to achieve a happier state on earth accompanied by a fuller realization of the great hidden goods which the universe must contain within itself' (1972: 112). This project persisted in much Enlightenment thought, which adopted the image of a clockwork universe (1972: 119-20) along with the idea that science could uncover the secrets of the 'happy' Fall and thus help regain a lost paradise on earth (1972: 156-57).

Carolyn Merchant also located an influential example of the Western hero myth of teleological, evolutionary progress in the biblical tradition towards ever greater light. For her, the agricultural myth of the Fall inspired philosophies of necessitated improvement according to a decline from a Golden Age, which she also discussed in terms of Classical, Platonic, and Baconian myth (2003: 42-57). The 'master' narrative requires technology for the improvement of a hard earth—masculinist



technologies must fertilise the barren soil to our advantage, whether inspired by biblical or scientific ideologies (Merchant 2003: 71-75, 93-94). The historical trajectory of such an idea thus follows a course through Classical philosophy to the theology of Salvation in the Middle Ages, through the mechanical cosmos dictated by Descartes, to the transformation of religious mythology into secular philosophy. Finally, the industrial fervour of Modernity replaced a Christian heaven with a technological recovery via labour and invention (2003: 115-16). Merchant sees paradise regained today in the well-lit mall (2003: 167-68), which fulfils the modern desire for an urban heaven: 'The upward progress of humankind, from darkest wilderness to enlightened mind', Merchant concluded, 'is a precondition for the new earthly garden' (2003: 178-79).

Across America, the expanding profusion of electric light was allegorized as a cultural victory for modern civilization, which impressed its mastery over the rest of nature and its relative darkness (Nye 1991: 35-36, 46-47, 160-62, 371-80, 390-91). By the late twentieth century, the metaphorical New Jerusalem could be imagined in terms of materialistic hope, a modern consumer culture bathed in the 'neon sun' of multinational corporate capital (Wheeler 1999: 166). Exactly how the world of consumerism proffers the spiritual possibility of transcendence in a materialistic package must now be discussed.

### *Modernity, Light, and Ecology*

#### *The Commodity Fetish and 'Directed Attention'*

Today's dominant modes of production and consumption assume that the light of human culture stands over and may endlessly transform the relative darkness of a 'nature' that has been variously defined as inert, chaotic, or mechanical. This attitude maintains much of the dualism institutionalized with early large-scale settlement civilizations such as those in Mesopotamia, but becomes exponentially more damaging with the machinations made possible since the industrial revolution. Over the last century the symbolic weight of this model has shifted towards consumption of an ever-revolving array of consumables that promise to fill in the gap once satisfied by spiritual belief, ritual experience, or immersion in (or identification with) nature. For this dominant paradigm, the animism of the earth is dead, but a sense that the world is alive survives in the corporeal quickening experienced with consumption. As a result, our ability to enjoy experiences of immanence or atonement within the material world becomes associated with a vast raft of technological and synthetic mediators, which in turn replace the very transcendent states and symbolic quests that inspired them. By exploring the attraction of

this dominant mode and its twenty-first-century ideological packaging with recourse to Marx's concept of the commodity fetish, I hope to go some way towards answering Blumenberg's question about the effects of technology on the modern metaphors of light. This provisional answer will show how ecologically harmful, dominant modes of modern production and consumption are allied with a well-lit focus on commodity consumption. I will then continue this analysis by considering the way consumer attention is directed towards a utopian vision of paradise regained; the corporeal but ephemeral nature of the transcendence afforded by consumption of the commodity; and the way that the consumer's identity is ritually re-enacted with recourse to a commodity-as-idol bathed in light.

Marx's concept of the commodity fetish links material acts of consumption with an element of transcendent potential that is normally concealed from (or more accurately within) everyday life. For Marx, the commodity is fetishized to the extent that it retains some element of mystery in its transformation from raw material to exchangeable, or saleable, item. A commodity attains a religious, mystical, or transcendental dimension due to the extra value (over and above its material, or use, value) ascribed it during the process of its production and exchange (Marx 1970 [1867]: 71-83). This socially mediated process is obfuscated in direct proportion to the complexity of the division of labour inherent in the commodity's production.

The commodity, as idol of consumption, takes centre stage in the city of light, and the consumer's attention is directed toward it relentlessly. Electricity, provided mostly by the burning of fossil fuels, illuminates the modern city itself as an emblem of collective consumption, but it also brightens the allure of the commodity on display within the urban metropolis. Blumenberg pointed out that technologically directed light in nocturnal urban spaces targets the consumer's attention 'with ever more situations of coerced vision' (Blumenberg 1993: 54). With reference to the history of perspective in painting, he discussed the significance of Drummond's theatrical lime-lights and the way they focus the theatre audience's gaze on particular action on-stage. For Blumenberg, the modern individual is just as shackled to this kind of staged reality, or theatre of inauthentic life, as Plato's prisoners were in the mythic cave of the *Republic*. With our constant immersion in urban spaces and with the effects of lit advertising, the idea of the cave is easily translated into the modern quotidian; day or night, the consumer is subjected to the illusions projected before them in a pageant that promotes a very particular kind of reality. This 'directed attention', as I have come to call it, is a specifically modern usage of light that creates a glow of added prestige

around the commodity (whether product or service) and the prospect of its consumption. In this metaphorical context, the light of the modern city at night reveals the transformation of raw material into dazzling new cultural products promising transcendence (Marx); this no longer offers the sense of freedom from the spiritual limits of worldliness that once accompanied the symbol of light (Blumenberg); and thus urban electric light could in fact be considered inherently deceptive in terms of the ideal of liberation from the confusions of corporeal life (Plato).

The irony of this situation is that electric light is usually created by burning up the 'black gold' of fossil fuels like coal and oil, a process that transforms the dark matter of the earth into a show of transcendence over the limits of the physical world. Unfortunately, moves towards renewable energy sources in the developed world are overshadowed by the increasing combustion of fossil fuels in those nations now seeking the benefits of the modernization process; hence, greenhouse gas emissions actually still increase each year and are projected to continue doing so for the foreseeable future.<sup>2</sup> There is no doubting the transnational allure of electric power, which provides a favourable shift away from direct contact with messy fuels. As Wolfgang Schivelbusch noted, the disenchanting magic of electricity calls up and delivers the ancient promise of fire, transforming 'the flame's magical power of attraction' (1995: 179) into a miraculously safe and instant form of light (1995: 67, 71, 76). This follows the evolution of artificial light, from flaming brand to humble oil lamp, via whale blubber and kerosene, to the clean and instant flick of a switch that creates electricity in the developed world (Brox 2011; Nye 1991: 2).

Jane Brox also points out that the automatic, silent, and clean way that electric light appears at the flick of a switch hides the ecological cost of its production 'out of sight' (2011: 168). The distancing of urban culture from the rest of nature is thus created in the very way that electric light is accessed: via networks of grids from remote power stations, with the fuel burnt and tailings dumped elsewhere. One result of this is the hardening of a physical and psychological barrier between urban cultures and the rest of nature upon which they rely.<sup>3</sup> In the continuing shift towards fossil-fuel driven electric power and light, then, a sharp distinction is made between the places that are lit and the places that suffer in the

2. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), for instance, envisages greenhouse gas emissions will increase 50% by 2050 (Marchal et al. 2011: 5).

3. The ability to ignore agricultural rhythms and natural cycles of day and night is even a useful way to define what a city is, according to Tuan (1978: 1-2.)

shadows of this efflorescence; between cities and the rural or suburban places ruined by the extraction and combustion of fossil fuels and therefore between urban wealth and the environments of the rural or suburban poor, as well as between first and third world societies (Brox 2011: 69, 300-301; Plumwood 2008). Such equations may change in line with new developments in global energy consumption, but the damage done to the earth is not likely to cease soon.

In the twenty-first century, in fact, selectively creating artificial light out of the dark materials of the earth threatens to generate the very perils the process was designed to avoid. We now know that continuously combusting fossil fuel not only creates light and power but also exacerbates climate change, resulting in exactly the kind of weather conditions so often imagined as threatening the project of civilization. The ancient promise of plenitude and its tragic culture hero finds a remarkable literary representative in Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Doctor Frankenstein*, who attempted 'to pour a torrent of light into our dark world' but was instead destroyed by the monster he created (Shelley 1992 [1818]: 52). Her 'modern Prometheus' replaced gods of sky and earth in one crazed act of creative but abortive genius as he attempted to steal fire from the heavens *and* replace feminine cycles of biological reproduction at the same time. More recently, George Monbiot also allegorized the modern use of fossil fuels as a daring act of magic that would become undone both because of and in spite of its brilliance, this time utilizing the metaphor of a Faustian pact with the devil. As he pointed out, Marlowe's Faustus enjoyed a magically flying 'chariot burning bright' powered by Mephistophelian fossil fuel (Monbiot 2006: 2). Monbiot thereby extends Blumenberg's literary and philosophical analysis of light's symbolic power, noting the ecological dangers inherent in the transformation of raw product to heavenly promise. Faust, like Frankenstein, trades the short-term transformative power of high energy against long-term loss (of soul, as well as of habitat). The NASA image of the planet at night emblematises the human colonization of the 'four corners' of the earth in an equally ironic, global proliferation of electric light. Along with the material advantages afforded by technologically developed modernity, we must, along with Brox, ask to what extent a persistent 'dream of abundance and brilliance' (Brox 2011: 293) now hampers us more than the darkness ever did our ancestors (2011: 303). This question requires some analysis of the addictive qualities of light and the promise that is maintained in the dazzling glow of countless urban centres today.

*The Corporeal but Ephemeral Transcendence of Modern Consumption*

The political economy of modernized light operates as a promise of transcendence that can be experienced as an embodied overcoming of earthly limit. Consumption of any stripe can proffer a sense of transcendence, for the fleeting moments it lasts, in the simple overcoming of the fear of lack and limit. Ernst Bloch pointed out the utopian desires inherent in the wish towards abundance, eternal life, and other qualities often associated with the figure of light in his *The Principle of Hope*. Our individual and collective wishes for 'illuminated *display*...brightened distance in *travel*, the *dance*, the dream-factory of *film*' and abundant health, along with imagery regarding '*society without deprivation*, the marvels of *technology*', all reflect hopes that a lost paradise may be regained (Bloch 1995 [1938-47]: 13-14<sup>4</sup>). These wishes arise with everyday desire: 'The drab person colours himself as if he were glowing... The ego changes itself into...a saleable, even sparkling commodity' (1995: 339). Commodities themselves are 'dazzlingly illuminated behind glass, looking for customers' (1995: 342). Bloch called advertizing 'the big drum' for the commodity, which is marketed as an 'especially appealing' magical panacea, shining out from the shop-window ('Light of Advertising', 1995: 343-44). Schivelbusch concurred that there is an element both perennial and distorted in modern advertising and the way its 'commercialised festive illumination' targets consumers (Schivelbusch 1995: 142). For him, shop lights are a domesticated form of the ancient bonfire, which combined 'motifs of waste and destruction' with the gifts of enlightenment (1995: 7). Our attention is then further directed towards the commodity form by television, which co-opts our instinctive desire to stare into an open fire (1995: 179). Likewise Nye noted the spiritual aspects of lighting displays, especially at American World Fairs (Nye 1991: 3, 161-62, 368-71) and even in the 'Great White Way', as newly lit main streets were early known (1991: 29; and for intercultural examples of the way physical light confers spiritual dimensions, see Bille and Sorensen 2007: 268). While this explosion of nocturnal luminescence was intrinsically linked to prestige (Nye 1991: 242-43, 382) and abundance (1991: 57, 352), it was also quickly normalized in the eyes of the public, so that those who would profit from a new paradigm of electric light consistently increased the element of spectacle associated with it (1991: 34, 56-57, 353).

This development should be kept in mind when we consider Bloch's determination that the process of modernization insistently promotes its benefits with fairytale images of magical plenty (1995: 355-57) and the

4. Here and elsewhere, all italics in quoted material appear in the original texts.

'wishful dream of the fountain of youth' (1995: 460). For Bloch, both of these hopes—for perpetual abundance and eternal vitality—create possible futures out of persistent dreams. For him, as for me, the commodity must be analyzed in the context of modernity's conflation of spiritual possibilities with consumerism, because the most consequential issue being administered in this process of dreaming is no less than 'the abolition of death...[and] the finding of the earthly paradise itself' (1995: 751). Ironically, Bloch believed the commodification of utopian potential unnecessarily distanced us from the true 'homeland' beneath our feet (1995: 755). Since he penned his tome in the mid-twentieth century, however, the commodity has only gained in prestige, the homeland of the planet is far more brilliantly lit with the signification of human desire, and we are more aware than ever of the ecological crisis that accompanies the dominant system of production, commodification, and consumption. Fredric Jameson recognized this and the way that 'Utopian corporeality' haunted everyday products (like aspirins and deodorants, organ transplants and plastic surgery) with 'muted promises of a transfigured body [and]...overtones of immortality' (Jameson 2005: 6). Roland Barthes also showed how myth parades cultural imagery as emblems of transhistorical nature, famously underscoring the mythic aspects of mass media and advertising in his *Mythologies* (Barthes 1974: especially 142-43). But of course the commodity promises a corporeal transcendence that does not last—like the utopian dreaming that inspires it and towards which it points, the desired state vanishes across the horizon after the briefest of visits. The result is addiction to the commodity. Because of their brief temporal nature, the ephemeral satisfactions of consumption require repetition, the utopian transcendence offered by materialistic consumption thereby perpetuating the sense of lack that drives it. Even in the mythical land of Cockayne, those roast birds on the wing had to keep flying into the hungry peasant's mouths; once something is consumed, it has to be replaced.<sup>5</sup> The brightly lit *mythos* of modern consumption is organised around a failure to acknowledge the unsustainable habits upon which it is constructed.

A true addiction is notoriously difficult to kick, however, and the mythic suggestion that we can be free of the limits of the earth and our bodies while still inhabiting them is a powerful drug indeed. This symbolic quest and its promise of satisfaction keeps consumers addicted to 'the light' in a way that is psychologically and ecologically damaging. In

5. The earliest recorded 'Land of Cockayne' was a fantastical poem probably composed in Ireland in the 1330s. Alongside those roasted birds (ll. 102-112) it featured permanent daylight and eternal life (ll. 26-28).

a brilliant reversal of terms, Mark Tredinnick calls today's cities brilliant 'white holes', factories that thrive on light and never want to stop eclipsing the darkness, insistently consuming the earth to illuminate the present and to foreshorten eternity (Tredinnick 2008: 153). This terminology recalls Adorno and Horkheimer's crushing critique of the modern Culture Industry, which extends the mechanical rhythm and routine of the workplace in film and canned laughter (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002 [1944]: 104) as it perpetuates the Enlightenment myth of culture's dominance over nature (2002: 20-21). Like them, I would like to see the promise of the Enlightenment and modern technologies shorn of the ecologically and socially disastrous ends towards which they have been turned.

The modern, global socioeconomic system trades on the consumer's hopes for a better place, a state that inevitably disappears soon after it has been consumed. The cost of this addiction is borne out right here on earth, however. The ephemeral satisfaction conferred by the light of materialistic consumption carries an immediate and transparent cost to its constituents—one must sacrifice to the system of labour in order to be able to buy a stake in the myth—and the dream also hides the more opaque ecological cost of its tendency to destroy the very ground upon which it is constructed (the earth). A false order of mastery threatens its own foundations, in this case compounding consumer addiction with desacralized rituals that intimately associate modern identity with habits of consumption. Semiotician Cosimo Caputo claims that the psychological terms of this new 'dominion of identity can be seen at work...in the aspiration to behave like the powerful...[by] running toward light, toward the de-materialization of being' (Caputo 2001: 235). For Caputo, the realm of fame represents a brightly lit dream with deep roots in the religious aspect of human life, and the commodity is attended by a similar aspect of desacralized worship: 'Everything is considered in terms of merchandise deprived of its use value and rendered the object of veneration, idols in the bright empyrean of shop-windows' (2001: 235-36). The consumer's attention is directed, then, towards the corporeal yet ephemeral—and thereby addictive—promise of the idol.

Caputo maintains that today's idol, as fetish, draws a different modality of visibility to the sacramental icon, which 'provokes the gaze, invites it not to stop, but to look about'; the idol, 'instead, captures the gaze, it does not let it digress, but indeed dazzles it: the thought itself is satisfied, it is emptied of its materiality' (2001: 238). This can be seen at work in brightly lit consumer products at the local supermarket: 'In contemporary fetishization the light of merchandise is devoid of differences', yet its shadow escapes and haunts, submerged by our obsession

with the 'ever-new', so that we fail to create 'a relation with the uncontrollable' (2001: 238). The psychic colonisation involved in this new form of order triumphs with 'a kind of gelatinous doctrine that insensibly envelops all rebellious reasoning, inhibits it, confounds it, paralyses it until it is suffocated...[so that] it is not an exaggeration to speak of modern dogmatism' (2001: 235-36). In our flight toward the light we refuse the shadow: 'We continuously endure passions, tensions, fears, anxieties, and in order to escape them, we have created Platonic paradises of life without death' (2001: 236). This is a desacralized version of an ancient attempt to realise a heavenly world of abundance here on earth—an eternal feast in the halls of immortality, where lack and death are banished. Such attempts transform a mystic possibility—that the symbolic quest for the bounty of eternal life could be manifest on earth, in the body—into a political economy.

The ineffable mystery that, for the mystic, illuminates matter from within with sacred light, has no place in today's dominant marketplace (the capitalist co-option of New Age philosophies notwithstanding). The same messages of relentless consumption that pervaded the emergent modern medium of television now saturate the new electronic ether of mobile phones, gaming, and social networking (alongside, as always, the counter-traditions that challenge the dominant paradigm; Berry 2010a). Twenty-first century electric light communicates a paradoxical ideology of collective individualism, wherein we can all celebrate the right to remain anthropocentrically selfish and alienated from the rest of nature. Ironically, modern consumption is driven by a desire to worship the body, but retains much of the distrust of corporeality that led to medieval denial of its sacred nature. In the modern city of light, the body is worshipped only in its youth and in denial of its mortal limits; the feeling of being forever young is marketed to consumers constantly. This does not celebrate the body per se but its overcoming; again, the dominant narrative of commodification commends worship of a cultural 'light' that defeats the darkness, disease, and death inherent in the rest of nature.

### *Conclusion*

Today's global civilization is inherently intertwined with the evolution of the city and the technologies that accompany it. Light's metaphorical value has changed along with this evolution, but, as Blumenberg pointed out, the way modern urban light is used to target attention has come to compromise our innate fascination with the cosmos and an associated philosophical freedom from worldly constraints (Blumenberg 1993: 53-



54). I am in accord with Blumenberg's concern at the way modern technologies mutate light's potential as a metaphor for self- and world-understanding; but this phenomenon begins much earlier in the history of civilization than he recognised, as the symbol of light has been co-opted to represent human mastery over the relative darkness of the rest of nature since the beginnings of large-scale settlement civilization. Also, the mechanised white noise and electric light pollution of modern cities does not only blot out the star-studded majesty of the universe, it also directs attention away from the very places we inhabit, the delicate cycles of organic life and death in our local habitats, the humble, particular, and interdependent as well as that which is immense, universal, or free of worldly concerns. The quest to supply permanent electric light to the earth also misses the inner focus of the sense in which enlightenment has traditionally been linked with concepts of grace, or awakening to the kind of great wisdom or inner peace that generates spiritual generosity or compassionate love for all life. Modern commodity culture transforms such hopes into a very worldly experience of 'freedom', which in turn portends ecological disaster.

The technoscience that enables the creation of today's cities of light distances urban constituents from the ecological costs of the modern fuel fetish. The glow of early twenty-first-century cities, as seen in the NASA image, represents an attempt to fulfil a perennial symbolic quest to transcend darkness. Large-scale, now global, settlement civilization sheds enormous amounts of artificial light in an attempt to manifest an earthly paradise of eternal youth and perpetual abundance. But to experience this heaven on earth, or land of milk and honey, we must indulge in repetitive acts of consumption, which confer corporeal but ephemeral satisfaction in an addictive framework. This cycle acts like a Platonic cave of illusion, offering a perpetual glow that does not enlighten but enslaves. For the consumer, light operates as a symbol of self-involved commodification in a relationship powered by an ecologically disastrous fuel fetish, which ironically suggests otherworldly freedom while consistently despoiling the earth. The modern city thus attempts to materialize a universal realm under the law of light, which was first idealised by ancient sun-kings, later composed on behalf of the utopian dreams of religious scientific systems, and is now idealised by ideologues of profit everywhere.

Yet the binary code that places human culture over and above the material world upon which it acts—the matter that is defined as inert, passive, mechanical, or chaotic by comparison—is also being transformed. This is occurring with the growing realisation that humanity cannot escape the ecosystem of which it is a powerful but dependent

part. The Western traditions of religion, philosophy, science and literature reveal a remarkable capacity for transformation. This needs to be underscored alongside ecocritical recognitions of the same traditions' negative capacities, especially in terms of the way these narratives can be seen to have condoned large-scale devastation of the earth's biosystem and our fellow creatures within it. The creative spirit inherent in Western culture at its best can reach deeply into the roots that still nourish it from the depths of its layered history, reinventing new ways to celebrate life on earth beyond the stolid dictates of large-scale settlement civilization or conventional religious, technoscientific, or corporate ideals. In fact, the resurgence of 'nature religion' sentiments in modern society (in secular and religious contexts) shows that there is currently a popular will to recognise human dependence on—and even love and worship of—the earth. This resolve can also benefit from patient consideration of alternative epistemologies, especially those of the indigenous cultures that feature proven records of more sustainable ways of life. Such sentiments, as they become more widespread and inspire political action, have the potential to help humanity towards a set of more complex and realistic relations between human culture and the rest of nature. This course of action would resist uncritical acceptance of cultural mastery over the earth and the habits of commodification and overconsumption that accompany the ancient 'light over dark' dualism it perpetuates.

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