

Remoteness of Light: Reflections on an Episteme of Space-Time and the Design of Nature

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Abstract – This essay presents, on the one hand, a conceptual reflection around what we have called an episteme of space-time and the design of nature as a way to discuss the dynamics of darkness in the north of the planet by arguing that darkness is actually only remoteness of light. On the other hand, this text is also an introduction to an aesthetic discussion and creative processes that sustained the authors' development of the installation, *Remoteness of Light*, exhibited at the Nordic House in Reykjavík, Iceland, in the context of the *Dynamics of Darkness in the North* conference in February 2015.

Keywords – Darkness, remoteness of light, media studies, media arts, critical design

During the last weeks of the boreal winter – if the weather permits so – around two o'clock in the afternoon the rays of the Sun seem to hit the snow covering the streets of Reykjavík with such a precision, and light appears thus as a phenomenon so sharp and crystalline, that it is hard to describe it without referring to what technical media have taught us about light beams: for example, the moment when the lens of a photographic camera confronts the Sun

– even a fraction of a second will be enough – revealing thus in the resulting image, the *nature* of light as the translucent geometric pattern that we usually call lens flare. In a context like this, when February 2015 was coming to an end, a myriad of people gathered precisely in Reykjavík aiming to reflect on the *dynamics of darkness in the north* from diverse disciplinary perspectives. Hence, they travelled long distances willing to address such phenomenon from the vast sciences, others from the humanities, whereas more than one, perhaps, expected to do so from hybrid fields. Yet, it may be noted that the problem to be discussed – if we are allowed to call it a problem – triggered a sort of a paradox, because, after all, the general framework behind that meeting was the celebration of the *International Year of Light* promoted by the UNESCO. There lies then the first indication of a dialectic opportunity which would prevent us from thinking about darkness without paying constant attention to light. It is precisely there where we have situated ourselves as artists and designers, and where we pursue to locate our artwork as an object of inquiry; not in light or darkness specifically and separately, but in the aforementioned paradox and in the opportunity it offers for a dialectical exercise. We thought that by inquiring into such a space we would be able to approach from a new context the *sphere* containing our general matter of concern; namely, how we know and understand the world we live in through *things*. Thus we have travelled from Santiago de Chile with an artwork that was exhibited in the Nordic House in Reykjavík, aiming to claim that from our perspective there would be no such thing as darkness, but rather only what we aim to call *remoteness of light*.

Thus in the following pages we will explore the relation between light and the history of knowledge as shaped by science, paying special attention to some of the aspects that the German scholar, Friedrich Kittler, can teach us about

the field of optics. Then, in a second moment, we will approach what we call *the design of nature*, which in this case, alternatively, will not refer to what nature constitutes as an *a priori* but just the opposite; that is, how humanity designed what we have called nature through articulating norms, techniques, scientific laws, and, as a consequence, by developing technologies. For such purposes we will look at the work of the French anthropologist and philosopher, Bruno Latour, which we will discuss in the light of other authors' arguments and ideas too. Finally, all of the above will give us the framework to deepen in the conceptual and aesthetic configuration of our artwork, *Remoteness of Light*, paying special attention to its interior and exterior material conditions.

Light and Optical Media

The rays of light – which are, in the end, light itself – move between things and our eyes, while at same time they caress the surface of this planet of ours to give us sunrises and sunsets, which are deployed, simultaneously concatenated in different points of the globe. In this way, by paying attention to the movement of light between the Sun and our cities human beings have designed conventions and norms that gave us the North and the South, the East and the West, forms of navigation, and the modes *to project*, to plot, this planet. Thus when this light gets closer to Santiago, it moves away from Reykjavík, giving us particular modes of knowing and comprehending our world *from the other side of light*, to paraphrase Friedrich Kittler.¹ Precisely from an archaeological point of view – to honour the aforementioned reference – a part of our argument seeks to draw a link between, so to speak, the history of our relation with light and the history of what we can call *objects of knowledge*. Our inter-

¹ Kittler 2010: 19

est here is to argue that, first, the human understanding of the movement of light over *things*, as well as the effects of such movement, has allowed us humans to understand the so-called *nature*; and secondly, that it has been the study of light and its behaviour that has let us build an image of ourselves in this planet. In other words, visualizing the movement of light, its closeness and remoteness, gave us modes to know the place we call home, and thus the development of optics contributed with forms and techniques to situate ourselves at it properly.

When this light gets closer to Santiago,
it moves away from Reykjavík,
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to paraphrase Friedrich Kittler

As Friedrich Kittler reminds in his book *Optical Media*, it was Leonardo da Vinci himself who stated that “[t]he sun never sees a shadow”². This sentence, very modest in appearance, is of particular importance to us. Not only because it is shadows, that is to say, darkness, what has brought us to this discussion, but rather because it would be from those shadows that knowledge and then science begun to be built. Hence, we dare say that probably it was darkness – *remoteness of the light*, to be consistent with our argument – what motivated human beings to contemplate the world and then to develop ideas, theories, and models based on it. A stable place with static and constant light,

² Kittler 2010: 19

perhaps it would not have led to the epistemic drift triggered by a territory where light moves away and then comes back, generating a paradigmatic loop which took men and women to only one conclusion: we are at the other side of the Sun, at the other side of light. This is a condition *sine qua non* – our own condition. Thus bearing that in mind, we would like to move now to the particular field that allows us to develop our questions in the manner we intend to deploy here, namely, art and technology, which, in Kittler’s words, “represent two ways of shifting the boundaries of visibility, so to speak, by either misusing or circumventing the sun”;³ in historical terms probably the most thoughtful and inventive field regarding the question of light.

Consequently, bringing optical media to this discussion, which at least initially invites to think of contemporary technology only, will allow us, however, to look over a sort of genealogy, which could delineate how our perception of (and in) the world, was *artificially* conditioned by a ceaseless work to technically understand and control the phenomenon of light. Thus in this also archaeological path the *camera obscura* emerges as a fundamental apparatus, and even though it can be loosely situated in the fifteenth century’s Europe, it has traceable backgrounds that go all the way back to Antiquity⁴, teaching us thus the dialectic relation between darkness and light. We know that the technology of this device consists of opposing a bright object to a cubic chamber or box into which no light enters except for the one penetrating a small hole on the front side of the aforementioned volume, which rightly faces the bright object. Thus the rays of light coming from the object crowd towards this powerful hole getting into the shady space, being expanded then in conical shape to project an upside-

³ Kittler 2010: 19

⁴ Link & Röller 2011: 23

down remote re-produced image of the bright object on the interior rear side of the box (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Schematic illustration of a camera obscura



That image has *told* us, doubtlessly, many things. First, it empirically shows the significant and inseparable relation between light and darkness, which, at least from our condition as those at the other side of light, reiterates that only from darkness the so-called humankind has been able to *value* light. Second, the image also shows that the movement of light towards darkness is what triggered the emergence of remote images, making possible, for instance, the discussion about what has been called *the real*, *the symbolic*, and *the imaginary*.⁵ Third, the image inside the *camera obscura* seems to point out that this apparatus is not anything else but, paradoxically, both a technical and symbolical analogy of our own position in the planet Earth; that is, individuals thrown into darkness, waiting for the arrival of light to see, to know. In sum, darkness would be the *place* where human-

⁵ Kittler 2010: 39-40

ity were able to build knowledge from and thus through it, to develop science and in the end, *the* mode, our mode, to know the world. An important antecedent to sustain this premise is *linear perspective*; and even though it cannot be connected directly to the *camera obscura* through strong evidence according to Friedrich Kittler, it can be linked to the dark chamber, however, by way of historical speculation and more precisely by paying attention to its conical hole – a structuring element for the development of painting, architecture, and engineering during the Renaissance.⁶ All the more, just as the German scholar puts it, the genealogical tie between these two aesthetic apparatuses can be found in the work of the Italian artist, Filippo Brunelleschi, who around the year 1425 used this conical hole to obtain a remote reproduced image, which through *linear perspective* allowed him to paint the façade of the church of Saint Giovanni in Florence, locating himself right in front of it, inside the Santa Maria del Fiore cathedral, using the latter as a dark chamber. It is paradigmatic in this example that Brunelleschi then included another hole on the painting itself, inviting an eventual spectator behind the canvas to look through it and watch the church of Saint Giovanni for, while holding a small mirror with a hand, witnessing with her/his own eyes the verisimilitude between reality, *linear perspective*, and the re-produced image.⁷ This case study is absolutely medullar for the purposes of this text, because it shows with clarity how the movement of light towards darkness – not only as a matter of fact but as a philosophical one too – can be seen as a foundational aspect of the so-called sciences of the artificial, which are, in the end, a part of the techniques we have given ourselves to understand and design the world, and thus, it comes without saying, our place in it.

⁶ Kittler 2010: 53-54

⁷ Kittler 2010: 54-57

Designing Nature

Following our argument that there would be no such thing as darkness but only *remoteness of light* – a rhetorical effort to sustain this reasoning, this conceptualization – we would now like to state that similarly there is no such thing as nature, at least not in an autonomous and pure sense – not for our eyes, not for our gaze. To put it another way, we consider that nowadays nature seems to be tantamount to the artificial, or that the distinction between the former and the latter should be reconsidered. On that track let us support these claims with the work of the French anthropologist and philosopher, Bruno Latour, who in his article *A Cautious Prometheus? A Few Steps Towards a Philosophy of Design* states that “[nature] is in great need of being re-designed”,⁸ arguing that given the expansion of design towards new *spheres* of culture, insofar as contemporary practice, it should also take over nature. Understanding that Latour’s tropes are an important part of his modes of expression and considering that his article’s initial ideas seek, on the one hand, to provoke and, on the other, to situate the issue within the historical context that his work covers, that is to say, so-called modernity, we would like to add, nonetheless, that nature, since humans were intellectually and technically able to do it, has been always artificially designed. This precedes by many centuries the Renaissance – a period in which, as mentioned above, *apparatuses* like linear perspective emerged. Similarly, it is important to consider that the scientific knowledge triggered, so to speak, by the implementation of the camera obscura, emerged from Greek and Arabic cultures during Antiquity, just as it was pointed out earlier. All the more, Aristotle himself described the phenomenon behind the aforementioned chamber around the

⁸ Latour 2008: 2

year 350 BC by studying the relation of perspective and shadow between the Sun, the Moon, and the Earth; laying thus the groundwork for Arab mathematicians to build the first functional models of the camera around that same period.⁹ Therefore, if humans have been developing for more than two thousand years theoretical and practical techniques to model and visualize nature, would it be valid to argue that what we see, now and before, is only a designed version of it?

There would be no such thing
as darkness but only *remoteness of light*

Returning to Latour's work, let's consider what may be one of his fundamental premises: that we have never been modern.¹⁰ This somehow points out that all that knowledge based on pre-existent and irrefutable facts, which have dominated Western societies since Renaissance, when science forged itself as the only path to embrace concrete truth, would be coming to an end, and, all the more, that this could be seen in how we understand design today – a field where *things* emerge:

To think of artefacts in terms of design means conceiving of them less and less as modernist objects, and conceiving of them more and more as “things.” [...] So as their appearance as matters of fact weakens, their place among the many matters of concern that are at issue is strengthened¹¹.

⁹ Kittler 2010: 50-51

¹⁰ Latour 2007: 17-24

¹¹ Latour 2008: 4

Here it is important to notice Latour's differentiation between the mentality of the modern period, where issues were based on *matters of facts*, namely, the objective, and the alternative space, where issues constitute *matters of concern*. Then objects, conceptually speaking, would be overtaken by *things* – whose Germanic etymological root, *Dinge*, takes us precisely to the realm of concerns.¹² This is what we have pursued from the beginning of this text: to argue that through the development of instruments, procedures, theories, and apparatuses, we, humans, have modelled the *things* that concern us. We will thus say that we agree with Latour's *we have never been modern* statement, and that because of this we consider that a *politics of things*, so to speak, should take us to critically reflect on the epistemic and mediating role that technology and apparatuses have played between organized human groups, the polis, and *things* themselves;¹³ many of which are, ontologically speaking, (in) nature. Yet, beyond the optimistic tone of Latour's text on what design is or could be nowadays, let's consider, contradictions notwithstanding, that this, so to speak, cultural practice still holds a strong connection to what modernity has inherited us. Thus the Czech-Brazilian philosopher, Vilém Flusser, somehow tackles this in his book *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design*, arguing that the word design pertains etymologically to the domain of deception and malice, and that not very far from there we find the words machine, technique, and art – all close to *shady spaces*.¹⁴ In sum, these reflections push us back to the main question: is the world we see just what we have been able to design from darkness?

¹² Latour 2008: 6

¹³ Latour 2005: 1-33

¹⁴ Flusser 2002: 24-25

Towards a Remoteness of Light

Our answer to that (it is a group of re-articulated questions rather than an actual answer) was materialized in the project *Remoteness of Light*. This artwork seeks, on the one hand, to aesthetically approach the question of light and its condition insofar as movement and remoteness, and on the other, it wants to draw a reminder of the epistemic context in which the aforementioned issue could be located; that is to say, the dichotomy between artificiality and nature. Thus in the interior of the artwork a live-broadcasted image, which is generated by a camera obscura, depicts the view of a rooftop in downtown Santiago de Chile, thereby, sunlight, which at the time of the exhibition was close to that city, is processed and transmitted through darkness, artificially to Reykjavík (Fig. 2). Moreover, the exterior of the piece is a simulacrum of a tree trunk, a geometrically synthesized reproduction of an old and forgotten fragment of nature we found and collected from the southern semi-rural periphery of Santiago (Fig. 3).

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Figure 2: Image of the interior of the *Remoteness of Light* project

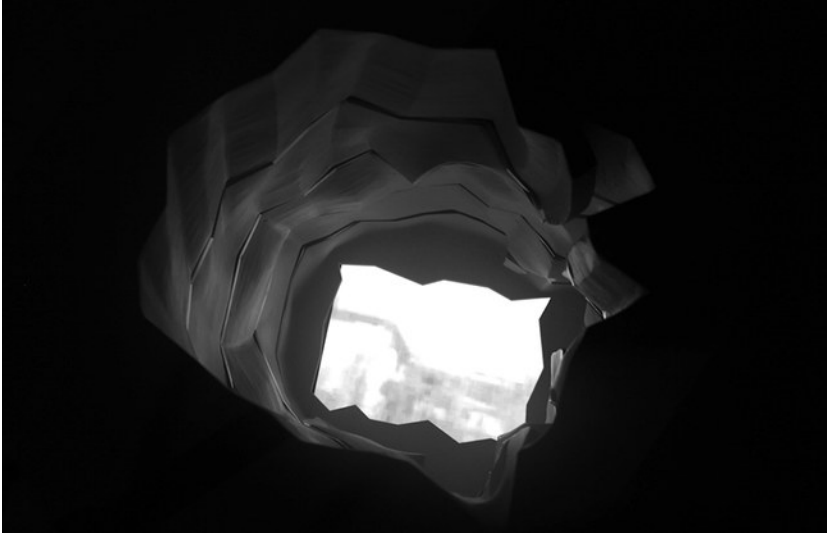


Figure 3: Image of the *Remoteness of Light* project in the country side near Santiago de Chile



Hence, we travelled with our artwork against the light, before and after presenting it in the context of the conference that triggered these reflections, to take the piece to the city border – a threshold where the artificial and the nature struggle, the place where the asphalt gives way to cold fluted lands hit by the sea, the also semi-rural periphery, where the yellow light of the streets vanishes in the grey of dawn as well as in the blackness of dusk. There, twice, in the gelid morning and then through the icy breezes of the early night, we sought to install our artwork as a probe that draws a middle line between light and its remoteness, and thus, accordingly, between an interiority configured by knowledge and its techniques and a mythological, remote and ungraspable exteriority called nature, which, ironically enough, we can only apprehend through techniques. *Remoteness of Light* thus was an artwork and a conceptual experiment to inquire into the material embodiments of modern knowledge and its, let's say, adversarial relation to nature, where light and darkness form a thread that weaves the mesh that sustains and expands the epistemic and aesthetic scope of such non-dichotomy. In the documentation two stars after the aurora call another pair of bright spots across the bay. There, below the clouds, they are the tiny contours of an imaginary interiority, inside a house, in a building. From this side, the pale surface of a shape synthesized out of an old forgotten trunk draws four bright horizontal lines, four cuts of light that remind that every exteriority shines through what comes from an interior – imaginary notwithstanding (Fig. 4).

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Figure 4: Image of the Remoteness of Light project near the Gróttu Lighthouse in Reykjavík, Iceland



This essay, therefore, represents the activation and support for an old and yet new broad discussion on the historical, theoretical, conceptual, and material questions that configure the fundamental issues of light and darkness and, consequently, the matter on which our perhaps too modern modes of knowing the world lie. Hence, these pages aim to be a complementary project that can guide the spectators of our artwork, either in an exhibition or through its documentation, towards a more transparent and thus richer dialogue with the artistic reflections, we as a team had over the process that took us to complete this piece, and then to displace it from one hemisphere to the other, towards the remoteness of the North. Yet, it is still worth insisting on how first media theory and more particularly the work of Friedrich Kittler, who, in our opinion and that of others, is one of the founding fathers of the methodological ap-

proach called media archaeology,¹⁵ constituted a substantial basis to begin and thus develop this historico-technological inquiry on the role of light and darkness in the, so to speak, technical construction of modern knowledge. And then, similarly, we have to remark that our search is also indebted to Bruno Latour's science and technology studies, which have helped us to understand how our material and artificially driven work as artists and designers can be configured as *things* and thus as objects of knowledge that incorporate in its form and materiality, an ongoing discussion on how modern scientific thought installs an invisible cloak of epistemic weight over the modes of perceiving and seeing the world – processes which always occur through the transparent presence of designed apparatuses of mediation.

In sum, these reflections push us back to the main question: is the world we see just what we have been able to design from darkness?

Finally, to conclude, let us leave a last (re)mark, this time again in the form of a question, which, borrowed from Michel Foucault, will perhaps help us to draw a wider justification for a work of art and design seeking to be a form of exploration and an inquiry on issues that, just as darkness, one cannot directly see:

One question remains in suspense: could one conceive of an archaeological analysis that would reveal the regularity of a body of knowledge, but which would not set out to analyse it in terms of epistemological figures

¹⁵ Huhtamo and Parikka 2011: 5-9

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and sciences? Is an orientation towards the
episteme the only one open to archaeology?¹⁶

¹⁶ Foucault 1972: 192

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Figure 3: Image of the *Remoteness of Light* project in the country side near Santiago, Chile. Image from the personal collection of the authors.

Figure 4: Image of the *Remoteness of Light* project near the Gróttu Lighthouse in Reykjavík, Iceland. Image from the personal collection of the authors.

Darkness

The Dynamics of Darkness in the North

Defining darkness can be an impossible exercise to explain absence, nothingness, and the absolute all at once. Darkness falls within a system of symbolic values where colours are ascribed to meanings that are related to one another. The relationship between darkness and the North is as ancient as that between the North and whiteness. The circumpolar day-night cycle, alternating between summer and winter, introduces the idea of a duality, between blinding brightness and everlasting night. The ten chapters of this book explore the dynamics of darkness in social science, humanities and art, and attest to the diverse range of contributions by the various authors and their disciplinary and cultural perspectives. Together, they shed light on the meaning and use of darkness, its position and role in the worldview of cultures, the scientific struggle with darkness, and not least the effects of this interplay on people's lives and their understanding of self and other.

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