

The Lightscape of Literary London, 1880-1950

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Introduction

The narrative of the simple ascendancy of a new technology over its outdated predecessor is essential to the way we imagine electric light in London at the end of the nineteenth century. However, this was not how electric light was understood at the time nor does it capture how electric light both captivated and eluded the imagination of Londoners from the close of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century.

'The Lightscape of Literary London, 1880-1950', addresses how the literary influence of the electric light transcends the widespread electrification of London to engage with an imaginary city, providing not only a connection with past experiences and conceptions of the city but also an understanding of what Frank Mort refers to as the 'extended cultural reach of the past'.



Social Lights

Walking the city is a way of knowing the city at a time when the urban landscape of London was changing rapidly in response to innovations in transport, sanitation, housing, and technology. For instance, men and, most importantly, women were becoming less restricted in their movements about the city. As these barriers were eroding, new connections between individuals and different social groups were being forged. In novels such as Dorothy Richardson's *The Tunnel*, Virginia Woolf's *Night and Day* and *The Waves*, Arnold Bennett's *Imperial Palace*, and Henry Green's *Party Going*, the gradual introduction of the electric light to both public and private spaces underpins and illuminates these evolving gender and class relationships.

Gothic Lights

In late Victorian gothic fiction, such as Richard Marsh's *The Beetle*, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and *The Jewel of Seven Stars*, and H. G. Wells' *The Invisible Man*, representations of emerging technological innovations achieve an uncanny balance between modernity and the otherworldly that serves to underscore the supernatural-ness of such fiction and leads readers to ask: Can the electric light be gothic?

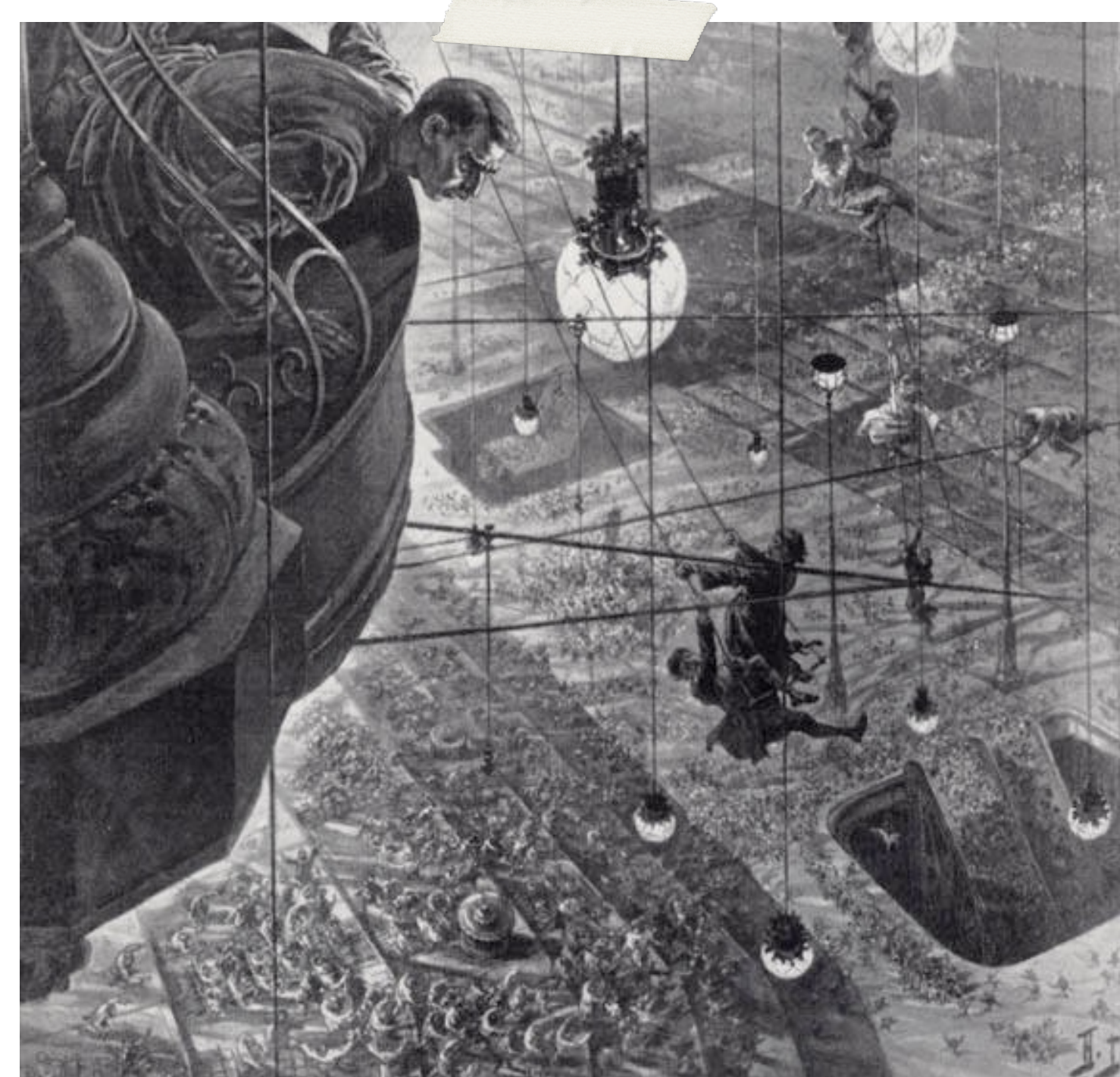


Front Cover. Richard Marsh's *The Beetle* (1897).

Dystopian Lights

In H. G. Wells's *When the Sleeper Wakes*, electric light dominates the future cityscapes imagined of the dystopian novels at a time in history when the fully electrified city was, as yet, unrealised in contemporary London. Wells aligns the threatening authoritarian power of the novel with the control of the production of electric power and illumination.

Following from Wells, Aldous Huxley uses electric light – an established public utility to foster dependency in a consumer society replete with sensual experiences in his novel *Brave New World*. In the post-war dystopia of *Nineteen Eighty Four*, George Orwell represents the electric light as a scarce resource used by the Party to simulate a state of uncertainty in an already oppressed people. Thus the electric light gradually becomes a metonym for power itself.

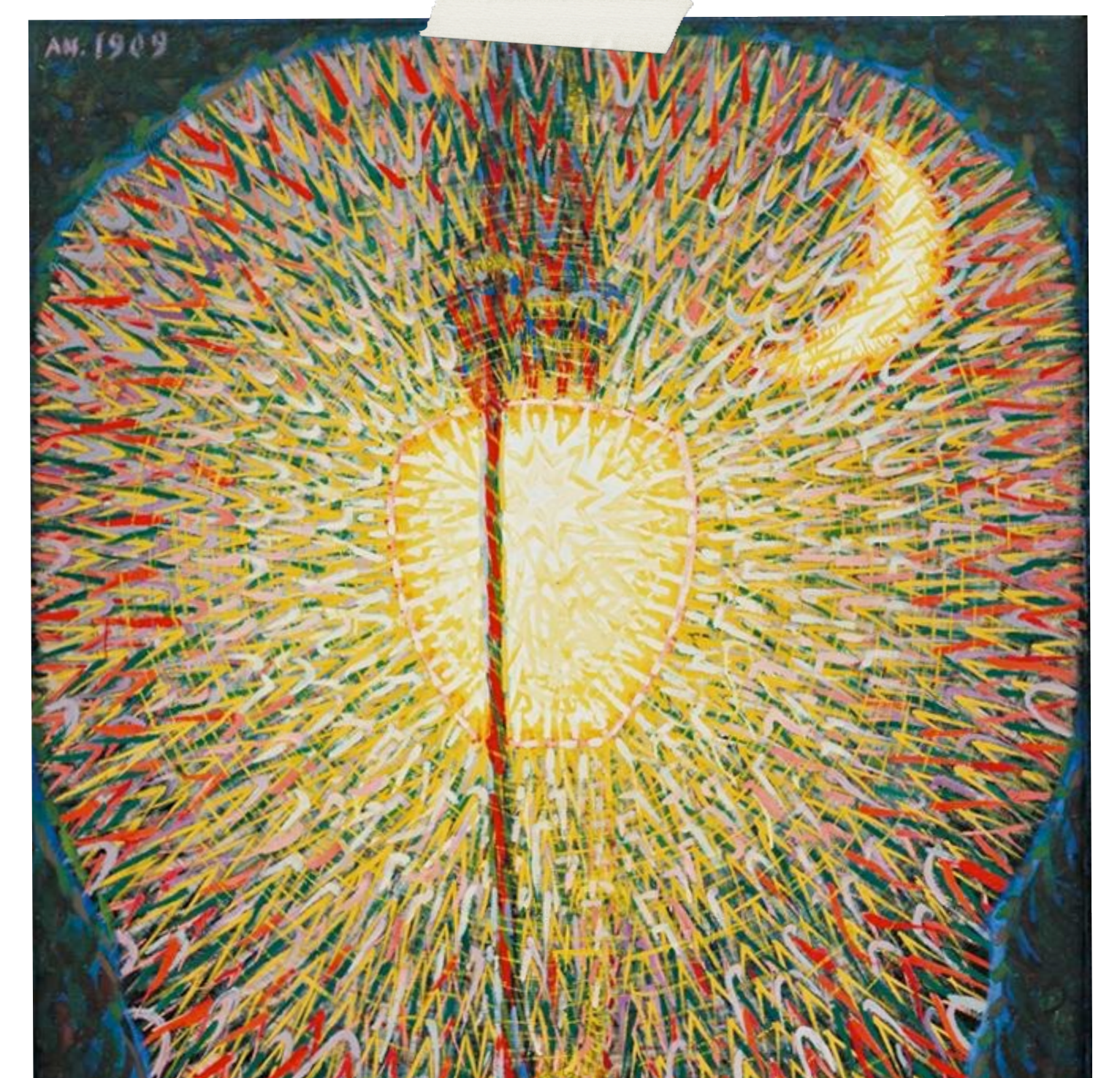


Henri Lanos. *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899).



Surveilling Lights

From the detective spying on the suspected anarchist dynamiter from beneath the glow of the ubiquitous street lights in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* to the danger of the lighted window during the black-out of 1940s London in Graham Greene's *The Ministry of Fear* and Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day*, the plots of *agent provocateurs*, double-agents, and fifth columnists complicate the traditional association of illumination with knowledge.



Giacomo Balla. *Street Light* (c.1910)

Conclusions

The literary influence of the electric light and its relationship with its illuminary predecessors transcends the widespread electrification of London to engage with an imaginary London, a literary London. As one of many innovations during a time of rapid social and technological change, the electric light exerted a nuanced yet pervasive influence on writers of this period. This is evident in the way writers represent a landscape of light, in which the electric light is only one source in the 'lightscape'. And yet it is an illuminating one, for it exemplifies the 'hybrid and dissonant experience of living intermittently within modernized spaces and speed, and yet simultaneously inhabiting the remnants of pre-capitalist life-worlds' proposed by Jonathan Crary.

Works Cited

Mort, Frank. *Cultures of Consumption: Masculinities and Social Space in Late Twentieth-Century Britain*. London: Routledge, 1996. Print.
Crary, Jonathan. *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. London: Verso, 2014. Print.

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