



Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century

Wolfgang Schivelbusch , Angela Davies (Translator)

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Wolfgang Schivelbusch tells the story of the development of artificial light in the nineteenth century. Not simply a history of a technology, Disenchanted Night reveals the ways that the technology of artificial illumination helped forge modern consciousness. In his strikingly illustrated and lively narrative, Schivelbusch discusses a range of subject including the political symbolism of streetlamps, the rise of nightlife and the shopwindow, and the importance of the salon in bourgeois culture.

Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century Details

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Beth says

Interesting look at the ways in which lighting technology is directly tied to industrialization and modernity.

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Robert Herry says

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Joseph Hirsch says

This is a solid overview of the history of lighting, public and private, from roughly the ancien regime days to fin-de-siecle when Europe was on the doorstep of true modernity. Yes, it is nominally about the 19th century, but this brief and concise overview also manages to cover the development of light from roughly the 18th century to the 20th century. There is some good technical information involved, though not so much that the layman should feel alienated, or that the book should be classified as ought but a social history. There's also a bit of Foucauldian (sic) theory in the mix, but this doesn't get too heavy-handed, and actually compliments the parts of the book that deal with light as a source of illumination, surveillance, and staging (especially in the chapter on how the lighting of shop windows turned consumers into both spectators and unwitting members of a large show).

The book is well-divided and clearly delineated, and begins by dealing with the centralization of gas and electricity, the importance of maintaining lighted streets to hold literal control of the street by the state (especially in France), and the struggle to find a light that was neither too imposing nor too powerful. Bourgeois as well as proletarian and aristocratic attitudes to everything from argon lamps to candlelight are illuminated (hee-hee) in these pages. A very interesting chapter on how light affected the perception and performance of theater pieces acts as a good coda to the short and straightforward book. Illustrations, drawings, and etchings are liberally scattered throughout. The images, while all black-and-white, capture the kind of gloaming charm of gas-lit cities and massive public exhibitions and international fairs that inspired the imagination in the Victorian era and continue to exert a strong imaginative pull on younger generations, who are into the steampunk and Victorian futurism stuff. Recommended, in any case.

Nina says

This book explores a niche in the sociological history - the effect the technological and industrial development of light had on the common cultural and psychological understandings of society.

Quite obscure but interesting and theoretically sound and filled with new information - for me, at least.

Debra says

I have always taken electric light for granted, and imagined life before industrially produced electricity as kind of how it's portrayed in the movies, where things are just, you know, a bit dim at night. But what I learned from Schivelbusch's surprisingly entertaining book (ok, who really thinks a 74 page chapter about the development of various types of lamps is going to be a page turner?), is that the night before electricity, and more so before gas lighting, was a deeply dark, and frequently terrifying, place.

The aforementioned chapter, The Lamp, maybe went into a bit more technical detail than I would have liked. But, Shivelbusch livened things up with some observations on processes of technological change, making points such as: it's not necessarily the person who invents it that we remember, but the person who communicates it; new technologies are generally modeled on old and breaking away from the assumptions and expectations built into old technologies is frequently the path to change; and technological change is often a process of two steps forward and one step back. These observations built into the detailed discussion of the development of lighting technology made this, in my opinion, the strongest part of the book.

The Street focused on evolving technologies of street lighting. It made me laugh to read about how many North American cities invested in giant lighting towers to illuminate large districts - mostly because a friend recently told me about one such tower in Austin, and it sounded so bizarre that I didn't believe her, only to find out that this was widespread. Night Life tread pretty quickly through a territory that has been pretty heavily covered by art and social historians: how illumination got people out partying and shopping at night in 19th century cities.

I think there was a bit too much on curtain colour and lampshades in The Drawing-room for my taste, but the chapter as a whole definitely reinforced one of Schivelbusch's main points: how we experience electrical light is socially constructed, although after a century of nearly universal electric light (in developed cities), it may feel innate.

Finally, The Stage got into more territory that has been well covered by art historians: the development of theatre and ways of seeing. Needless to say, theatre evolved over time from being a primarily social space with both audience and actors interacting, to one of passive viewing with lighting itself used to create the illusion and focus.

Based on my fascination with the section on lighting technology, I have to say that although there were quite a few parts of this book that I felt like I'd read about before, I think that for someone with a different background, this book would be utterly fascinating. Extra points, too, for the well selected illustrations throughout. Essentially, Schivelbusch managed to bring together the technological, social and aesthetic into a quite convincing argument that lighting technology hasn't just improved the way we see, it has fundamentally altered it.

shawn says

Very interesting book using the history of illumination to put forth an adaptive sociology of light-awareness. Poses and answers this basic question: How have the changes and technological advances in our artificial sources of public and household lighting affected our societies, individual psyches, and understanding of ourselves and our place in the world? Compelling material, to be sure. Great exploration of a fairly obscure premise. (Also incidentally provides the underpinnings of the narrative arc of Thomas Pynchon's "Against the Day", one of the best books in recent years.)

Amanda says

If anything, this book could be twice as long :o)

Yulya Yurchenko says

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MikeD says

Not particularly gripping, but, at times, interesting.

One part I found interesting was the concept of smashing of lanterns as a rebellious act.

Robert says

We take electric light for granted... yet most people who lived at the turn of the 20th Century agree that electric lighting was the most revolutionary change they witnessed. Never before in human history could people work, play, love, laugh so long after the sun went down as though it were day. This fascinating book explores how cultural mores and social interaction changed with the development of lighting from Medieval times to present.

Drew says

Never thought the history of lighting could be interesting at all. But this book really was. care to know why arc lights never gained in popularity? how about why electricity is distributed as it is?

Katie Jones says

Really interesting book that explains how the industrialization of light changed the course of history...starting with the French Revolution.

Walid says

enlightening! (what a fucking silly pun to make... arrrgh!!!)

Eric says

Awesome. I want to remove most of the lights out of my house and return to candles and oil lamps.
