

## ‘A dubious glow’: artificial light and literary emotions (1841-1913)

The key question my PhD research explores is "What were the effects of new lighting technologies in late 19th century Paris on writing about emotions?" This morning I'm going to share with you two pieces that have a bearing on the history of romantic love.

I argue that lighting as a narrative device was a way to generate romantic and sensual tension, to set scenes that stimulate emotions, to depict emotional states, and to affect the reader's attention and feelings. I am looking at a range of texts written between 1841 and 1913 that are set in Paris, focusing on Baudelaire, Hugo, Flaubert, Zola, Proust and Colette, aiming to show that the development of artificial lighting expanded the possibilities of reflecting and refracting emotional experience in literature. The implications of this research are that literary analysis that explores the history of technology in conjunction with the history of the emotions can provide insights into how literary emotions are a material part of technological eras, and vice versa. Secondly, that there are observable patterns and types in writers' use of lighting in emotion writing, and that the methods I'm developing to describe these could be applied to other technologies as well as lighting.

Night-time illuminations are part of literary realist spaces with distinctive moods, and playing with light and shadow allows writers to guide their reader's attention. In 1841, most of Paris — if lit at all — was lit with oil lanterns containing reflectors, or *réverbères*. Ten years later, however, 98% of the public lighting was gas (Delattre 2003, 128). The work of Haussmann, the public administrator responsible for the rebuilding of Paris during the 1850s and 1860s, consisted in modernising the existing gas network and expanding it to the neglected outer *arrondissements*, recently annexed to the city of Paris. The period from 1878, when the first permanent electric streetlamps were lit on the avenue de l'Opéra, was a crossroads of luminous worlds old and new, as many different lighting technologies—candles, torches, oil lamps, gas lamps, petrol lamps, electric bulbs—were used simultaneously in domestic spaces, workplaces, in the streets, and in between (Delattre 2003, 1-10). Gas lamps were still being installed in Paris in 1962, but electricity dominated from the First World War period.

### A typology of literary lighting for emotion, 1841-1913

The typology I am building presents the literary functions of light towards emotions in a broad corpus from this period.

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1. Tension lighting gives the reader a sense of resources running out; a feeling of time speeding up/slowing down, etc.
2. Context lighting changes the literary scene (new or same location); gives a sense of security or threat; indicates time (without tension); indicates time period; assists social categorising, etc.
3. Reveal/conceal lighting directs a reader's attention; blinds a character's vision; chaperones a character through space; chaperones a character or reader towards an understanding or revelation, etc.
4. Interiorising lighting takes the reader into a character's field of vision, perspective or senses: makes something or someone more ugly or more beautiful; evokes *love at first sight*, sparks desire, sparks interest; brings private thoughts to light, etc.

For example, in a scene from *Un Amour de Swann* (*Swann's Way*), Swann is searching for Odette who wasn't at the party. There is tension lighting, then reveal/conceal lighting as the figures become ghostly, then interiorising lighting as we enter into the character's anxiety via a description of the lights.

The second part of my research that I want to give a snapshot of is the notion of the luxotope.

### ***Luxotope: a theoretical device for discussing light + place + sensing in a work of art***

In the essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope", written between 1937 and 1939, Mikhail Bakhtin built his influential model of the chronotope:

We will give the name chronotope (literally, "time space") to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. (Bakhtin 119)

The examples he gives as chronotopes in literature are at once eccentric and instantly recognisable: 'an encounter, 'a parting', 'the road', 'an alien world', 'a castle', 'hosting a salon', 'a provincial town'. Building on this, I have identified literary luxotopes from my corpus: a woman's fleeting presence in the visible zone beneath a streetlamp; the lit window seen from the street or garden by a would-

be lover; and the just-extinguished candle in the bedroom.<sup>1</sup> The word “reworking” is important here, as these luxotopes have existed throughout literary history. Taking Bakhtin’s lead, they can also include luxotopes where the light is metaphorical, such as love-at-first-sight (in French, literally the ‘bolt of lightning’) and the ‘sudden realisation’ that is known today as the ‘lightbulb moment’ but whose existence precedes light bulb technology. I will focus on one luxotope: the soirée in literature, and apply the luxotope model to some scenes from French literature of this period.

From reading of soirée scenes, I identify three types of luxotope: the romantic luxotope, the anti-romantic luxotope, the post-romantic luxotope. In a romantic evening, everything in the environment conspires for love to happen: the moon is glowing, the night air is full of fragrant flowers, the nightingale sings, etc. In his book *The Invention of Evening* (2007), Christopher Miller analyses the way the romantic evening is introduced semantically, where ‘Wordsworth’s “It is a beauteous evening” synthesized the values and associations that evening had acquired in the eighteenth century’ (186). The romantic evening luxotope in literature is identifiable through moonlight, starlight, sunset and sunrise, as well as reflections in water and eyes, features we can think of as the romantic infrastructure that supports romantic sensations.

Flaubert is my favourite example of a writer weaving romantic luxotopes with anti-romantic luxotopes, in this example from *Madame Bovary*.

The use of reflection in the river, ‘qu’elle transperce d’une pâleur semblable à l’eau d’un fleuve, où tremble du gaz noyé’, is a romantic luxotope (for example that of Lamartine’s *Le Lac*) undercut and made impure: the surface of the eternal river is trembling with drowned gaslight. In this way, Flaubert’s writing weaves together a romantic luxotope of the soirée, capturing the real sensations of desire and romantic hope between Emma and Rodolphe, with a new, anti-romantic “drowned gas”. He exposes its ugly underbelly without refusing the fact that the senses experienced are real; on a corporeal level, there is romance. There is a heightened sensuality, a transfer from one sensual field to another; and simultaneously there is an impurity and a sense of ‘going nowhere’, as he describes a headless serpent.

In the first type of soirée luxotope, the romantic, the luxotope took us from sense to sense, through the portal of light, and into new forms of time informed by the senses. By way of lighting technologies, writers reworked romantic sensations. In the second type, the anti-romantic, the

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<sup>1</sup> see Del Lungo, 2014

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sensory potential of light is dampened or ignored, as the time forms of the material world outside the body take over, and block connection with the body, undermining romantic sensory infrastructure. In the third type, the post-romantic, the luxotope is a portal to new forms of time (memory, both literary and personal; imagination), and here it is especially relevant to bring back this idea of the luxochronotope, or time-space identifiable through its lighting mood. Rather than to argue, therefore, that gas and electric lighting in Paris created entirely new sensitivities to the time between day and night — which I leave to historians of time (Eco, Lippincott, Gombrich et al., 1999) and of time in Paris (Delattre 1999), and of society (Schivelbusch 1988) — I argue that the inclusion of lighting technologies in literature is a device to form certain luxotopes, and reinvent literary relationships between time, space, light and sensation. The fact that these luxotopes are so dependent on the urban design and technological context in which the literature was composed invites an exploration of the history of sensing through the history of technologies in literature.