

## A glimpse of light in the visual arts and the dance

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**ABSTRACT:** This article presents ideas on the use of light in the visual arts and dance. On the former, the work of Robert Irwin, James Turrell and Christian Boltanski will be explored. Installations by the three artists will be analysed and contextualized in terms of light function. In dance, views from and about William Forsythe will be shared as an example of a popular choreographer that investigates lighting design. Considerations on a piece by Akram Khan will be also presented to approach contemporary tendencies in dance lighting. The conclusion summarizes points of convergence and distance between the works cited which aim to serve as an inspiration to artists of all fields.

**KEYWORDS** –Dance, visual art, light, lighting

### I. INTRODUCTION

This paper is derived from the desire to reflect on possible encounters between the visual arts and the dance concerning the use of light. As a daughter of a visual artist and a dancer and professor interested in lighting designer, I have always noticed nuances, common principles between the two languages. From 2011, when I assumed the chair of professor of introduction to visual arts and lighting design, among other subjects, to drama and dance students at Bahia Southwest State University (UESB), my curiosity and research on visuality has increased.

The classes of ‘Introduction to the study of Visual Arts’ is mainly ran by a process of discussion of a topic, accompanied by the analysis of art pieces (images of paintings, sculptures, drawings, and photos) and films for fixation of knowledge and inspiration. In the second part of the class, the students experiment with drawings, painting, photos, videos, and other manual activities to express their impression on the studied subject. In the third period of the class, the students take turn to show their production and receive feedback from other students, before explaining their process of creation. This methodology allows a routine of being presented to a theme, explore practically, and verbalize and contextualize the productions. Creativity and curiosity are qualities that I observe and try to provoke in the students.

The classes of ‘Lighting design’ happen two (dance) and four (drama) terms after ‘Introduction to the study of Visual’. The gap between the modules is not a prejudice since the students often apply their knowledge to understand other subjects or to sophisticate performances. A more concise and deliberative use of colours, forms and movement in the work itself (costume, make-up for example) and the publicity material is popular. In the module ‘Lighting design’ the group develop studies on the possibilities of visual arrangements of dance performance both for their creation and the production of other artists, including a review of how, historically, the progress of light instruments echoed on the dance.

To draw a line pro proximity between the visual arts and the dance is commonplace to me. In ‘Introduction to the study of Visual Arts’ the module content refers to the contextualization of the art pieces in connection with dance. The class themed as contrast, for instance, serves to promote dialogues about how black and white colours can suggest profundity in paintings, and to situate that exploration of this nature (spatial

nuances) can be done through interplays of light and dark in indoor dance performances. Said that as a professor and a researcher I continuously investigate principles of the visual arts that can be applied or reinterpreted to study dance, always respecting the boundaries of the two languages to value both.

It was through a mobilization to understand more how lighting effectively contributes to a dance performance as a co-author, non as an outsider material, that I concluded a master's degree at Bahia Federal University in 2011. My practical motivation could be tracked back to 2005 when as an undergraduate student I started to work as a volunteer in the Dance School theatre and at the same time, began the creation of solos while experimenting with lights. This experience only grew my will and fascination with visuality and dance which led me to travel to the United Kingdom for a PhD in Dance in 2014 funded by the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (Capes/Brazil). My doctoral degree was based on practice-led research in which I explored interplays of light, shadow, and darkness. For contextualization and inspiration, I analysed diverse artworks from dance to visual arts. Both postgraduate courses were transformed into single-authored books: 'Dança de Luzes' (Dance of Lights) by Edições UESB (2014) and 'Lighting Dance: A study of technical, philosophical, and psychological shadows' by Routledge (2020).

The contribution of this paper relies on echoing connections between the visual arts and dance through lighting. It is divided into six sections counting this Introduction. In the second part, I present the work of Robert Irwin, James Turrell and Cristian Boltanski contemporary artists that employ different lights to achieve a similar effect: the co-optation of light as a concrete substance. In the third section, the choreographer William Forsythe is presented as a reference in lighting dance. In the fifth part, a dance performance by Akram Khamdemonstrates a sample of contemporary performance that triggers the audience by the lighting. In Conclusion, I indicate some converging and diverging points among the samples of dance and the visual art pieces and artists approached along the paper.

## II. TOUCHEABLE LIGHTS WITHIN THE VISUAL ARTS

In the field of visual arts, the works of Robert Irwin (USA), James Turrell (USA), and Christian Boltanski<sup>1</sup> (FRA) are key in the exploration of lighting. American visual artist Robert Irwin was born in 1928 and became popular in the 1960s for creating installations based on lights. The Irwin's installations have been analysed in books such as Robert Irwin: All the Rules Will Change by Evelyn C. Hankins (2016), and Robert Irwin: A Conditional Art by Mathew Thomas Simms (2016).

One characteristic of Irwin's work is the creation of installations with lights that invite the viewer to perceive geometrical patterns. In the installation 'Light and Space' (2005), for example, fluorescent tube lamps arranged in two and three vertices invite the viewer to visualize forms such as lozenges, squares, and triangles. These familiar shapes intrigue the public that walks in the space with the lights hanging in vertical panels. The distance of the public and the function of the lights are moving. Until recently, before LED lights, many people were used to fluorescent tubes in the ceilings of rooms for illumination of the space. The number of instruments would vary according to the size of the environment, but the position was often horizontal. When Irwin chooses to work with many tubes in a vertical position it changes perspective and promotes new ideas to interact and observe lighting.

The pieces of James Turrell also touch the senses. Turrell is an American visual artist who was born in 1943 and is popular for creating installations with lights. Turrell's productions include explorations of shape and colour of lights that transform art galleries into subjective spaces. His installations have been analysed in books such as *James Turrell: A Retrospective* by Michael Govan (2014), and *James Turrell: Geometry of Light* by Unna Kulturbetriebe and Ursula Sinnreich (2009).

Turrell's *Breathing light* (2013) is remarkable by the use overlay colorful lights. One characteristic of this installation is the degrees of pink lights in the entire room and a specific wall is marked by a rectangle also

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Boltanski is a French artist whose work includes film, photography, and installations. See: [https://www.armoryonpark.org/downloads/press/10\\_05\\_13\\_Boltanski\\_Press\\_Release.pdf](https://www.armoryonpark.org/downloads/press/10_05_13_Boltanski_Press_Release.pdf) Accessed: 02 January 2018.

created by light, suggesting an effect of three dimensionality. This aspect of light is not something that people encounter in the everyday life since the layers of colors of light evoke concreteness.

A similarity between Turrell and Irwin is that, among other artists, they took part in the artistic movement 'Light and Space' started in California in the 1960s. This movement was remarkable for the use of dematerialisation of objects and minimalism. In the case of Irwin and Turrell, instead of dematerialising objects, they proposed light as acting as the object. Due to the similarity of approaches, the installations of Irwin and Turrell have been analysed in parallel in art catalogues (Govan and Bernardini 2014 and Ratcliff, Zajonc, and Antonakos 2002) and books (Rivenc 2016 and Barros 1999).

The work of Christian Boltanski is also relevant within the contemporary scene of visual arts in the exploration of lighting. Boltanski was born in 1944 and since the 1980s developed installations with light. His oeuvre includes pieces that mix photography and lighting such as *The Reserve of Dead Swiss* (1990), *Monument to the Lycée Chases* (1989), and *Réliquaire* (1990). Boltanski's works have been an object of study for authors such as Fumanti and Eccher (2018), Mendelsohn and Greiner (2010) and Gumpert (1994).

In *Arrivée* (Arrival/2015), for example, Boltanski employs a series of lamps on a wall to form a word. The gaps between the lights remember children's drawing books as if the audience was invited to link the dots. Another curiosity of the work is the cables that a hanging visible in a careful, curved, way if ratify the necessity of electricity, a metaphor for reflections on dependency. Since Turrell and Irwin, Boltanski's pieces are not for physical touch, by hand, but the contemplation, the free movement near farther and by the sides of the installation, work as remembering the public the potential of everyday spaces and encounters. A more poetic view is that the pieces provoke the touch and the vision for people recalibrating their senses which must be tired of visual pollution in big cities and uniform lights on screens.

### III. FOR A LIT DANCE

In the field of dance, the choreographer William Forsythe (1949 -) is known for his use of lighting. He develops choreographic strategies in which lighting works to amplify dancers onstage. On the contribution of Forsythe on dance lighting some texts have been written by Keller (1999), Driver (2000), Briginshaw(2001), Spier (2011), Tomic-Vajagic (2012), Stanger (2013), Anderson (2015), and Hannah (2019).

Senta Driver, a dancer and choreographer, indicates how Forsythe's work is notable by the use of lighting:

A signature of William Forsythe's work is its technical dimension: the role played by daring changes of lighting and the action of stage equipment such as exposed instruments, curtains, and cables wired for sound. In lighting design as well as choreography he has led the field (Driver, 2000: 41).

The idea of a 'technical dimension' proposed by Driver refers to the way Forsythe employs lighting in dialogue with the aesthetics of his choreographies. Forsythe often transforms a black box theatre, a space designed to make possible illusory experiences with a system of curtains to hide lighting equipment and cables, into an arena in which lighting is not masked, but revealed in a strategy of adding visual contrast into the performance. In Forsythe's pieces, lighting does not exist to just reveal dancers, but mostly to create flexible spaces. In this scenographic construction, interplays of light and shadow are possible.

Dance scholar Valerie Briginshaw comments on *Limb's Theorem* (1990) by William Forsythe for the Ballett Frankfurt<sup>2</sup>. She focuses on the interplay of light and shadows:

Often the lamp illuminates one part of the stage and light spills over into other parts where dancers are in semi-darkness, or shadows of activity can be glimpsed. What can be seen clearly and what is only in half-light, shadow, or behind the screen is in a continual state of flux (Briginshaw, 2001: 244).

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<sup>2</sup> The Ballett Frankfurt was created in 1984. More information about the company and *Limb's Theorem* is available in: Spier, S. (2011) *William Forsythe and the Practice of Choreography: It Starts From Any Point*. Oxon: Routledge

One main point among Briginshaw's considerations is the role of shadows working to give a sense of half-appearance to the dancers. On Youtube<sup>3</sup> there is an extract of *Limb's Theorem*, which shows the interplay of light and shadows with dancers moving onstage. The video reveals an inclined panel lit from above that, by rotation, passes over the dancer, and puts him/her in shadow. This function of the shadow offers symbolic meanings to the audience. For example, a viewer might connect the dancer in the dark of the shadow with loneliness or mystery.

A reading by dance specialist Arabella Stanger about Forsythe's *Steptext*(1985) for the Ballet de Lorraine<sup>4</sup> is useful to illustrate symbolic meanings through shadows:

The effect [...] of *Steptextis* to blur the boundaries delimiting not only a fixed time, but also a fixed place for the performance, with the stage extending beyond a discernible border and vanishing into an expanse of shadows. This sense of an indefinite, or, indeed, infinite floor space is sustained at the blackout that closes the ballet, when the dancers resume in pairs their semaphoric sequence while walking backwards away from their partners before disappearing into the darkness (Stanger, 2013: 229).

The role of light and shadow to drive the audience's reception is a relevant point to reflect on Forsythe's process of creating choreographies. On the importance of reinventing light for his pieces, Forsythe explains that:

I guess one of the ways is to make the repertoire extraordinarily different in itself. I make a lot of differences within the repertoire. And I've basically lit one way, which is color temperature [refers to an approach that varies the color of light through bulbs that give yellow or colder, bluer illumination, rather than changing the color of the light with gel]. Single source stuff (Forsythe in Driver, 2000: 44).

Forsythe's comments are interesting because they identify his unusual method of lighting colour through equipment itself, instead of gel, which is a common accessory to colour light. In addition, the idea of exploring single light sources provides an inspiring strategy for the creation of choreographies. This facilitates dialogues between lighting and dancers' movement.

#### IV. A SAMPLE OF DANCE AND ITS LIGHTING MOTIVATIONS

The work of the British choreographer Akram Khan (1974 -) is known amongst dance critics for the way he uses the aesthetics of lighting. Samples of texts that approach Khan's importance in the field of dance lighting are Mitra (2015), Kaderlan (2015), Yeow (2015), RübSam (2018), and Jacobs (2017).

Khan perceives lighting as a powerful medium to reveal dancers, working closely with lighting designers. Most of Khan's work combines theatrical lighting and other sources such as multimedia projections. Theatre researcher Royona Mitra analyses *Bahok*(2008) by Akram Khan for the National Ballet of China:

All the signifiers come together to evoke an unspecified global transit zone. An electric drone starts to infiltrate the space as the light gradually dims into complete darkness. The sound continues to build to a crescendo through the darkness and creates an unsettling ambience that puts the audience on edge. It cuts abruptly as the darkness snaps into a still image of seven individuals who now occupy the formerly empty chairs, washed by a stark white light (Mitra, 2015: 217).

The use of focal lights fading out into total darkness as a drone invades the space reveals a strategy of dislocating the figures of the dancers as the main content of the choreography. As described by Mitra, the visual effect of *Bahok* follows musical stimuli designed to suggest tension regarding the stage space. The return of

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<sup>3</sup> Extracts of *Limb's Theorem* can be found in <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T1J1QrInMJQ> Accessed: 25 December 2019.

<sup>4</sup> The CNN - Ballet de Lorraine was created in 1968 in Amiens, France. More about the company and *Steptext* is available at: [http://ballet-de-lorraine.eu/en/pieces/28\\_Steptext](http://ballet-de-lorraine.eu/en/pieces/28_Steptext) Accessed: 25 December 2019.

light in a surprising and harsh way also demonstrates Khan's strategy of conceiving choreographies to provoke new experiences for the audience, a similarity to the work of Forsythe.

Khan is also inspired by his cultural background. Dance academic Jade Yeow analyses *Zero Degrees* (2005), a dance piece created by Akram Khan and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui<sup>5</sup>. As Yeow suggests:

Both collaborators grew up Muslim in Europe, learned the same prayers and endured the same Western stereotypes of Islam. Inspired by their own dual identities, the two search for this middle point through polar opposites: becoming/death, light/dark, chaos/order (Yeow, 2015: 208).

As described by Yeow, the lighting in *Zero Degrees* provides dialogues between the dancers and their shadows. On YouTube<sup>6</sup>, there is a video that reveals shadows on two different planes proposing distinct effects. One effect is shadows on the floor that work to highlight the distance between the dancers. The second effect is shadows on vertical panels around the stage that work to multiply the two dancers. These shadows are insightful and meaningful, but transient and do not establish a central lighting effect in the piece.

## V. CONCLUSION

The converging point between the work or ways of thinking by Irwin, Turrell, Boltanski, Forsythe and Khan is the creative use of light. From the displaced function (not only to lit but form shapes) and the new arrangement of fluorescent tubes to theatrical lights to dematerialize dancers or create shadows, lighting has been shown as a potent medium. These fundamentals can inspire artists from all fields to become more sensitive toward visual effects and people from other areas to contemplate more closely outdoors and artificial light.

A disadvantage to artists interested in lighting is access. Especially beginners can find it difficult to have access to lamps or black-box theatres or galleries. However, the COVID-pandemic that made people self-isolate at home could increase the chances to notice home as a creative space. In this context, the imagination can lead to forms of blockage of sunlight or interplays with artificial indoor lights (LED ceiling lamps, for example) in the search for artistic exploration.

As interested in the presentation of visual and dance artists that investigate lighting strategies, I hope that this paper serves to mobilize artists to continue the investigation of lighting in different venues (not only formal ones like theatres and art galleries) and, perhaps, look for more cross-inspiration between different artistic languages. I believe this would be helpful to the artists involved and to audiences.

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<sup>5</sup> Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui is a Belgium choreographer. More information about his career is available at: <http://www.roh.org.uk/people/sidi-larbi-cherkaoui> Accessed: 25 December 2019.

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