

Tom Holert
Blackout City

e-flux journal #65 SUPERCOMMUNITY — may–august 2015 [Tom Holert](#)
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01/07

And then the lights went off. The glistening, glittering, blinking structure turned into a skeleton of blackness, with only a few lights remaining in the picture. On January 8, 2015, at 8:00 p.m., the Eiffel Tower was stripped of its spectacular illumination for six minutes following the orders of the Paris town hall, or someone in the higher ranks of the French nation's government, who had decided that dimming the lights of the "iconic" monument in the "City of Light" would be an appropriate response of memory and mourning in the aftermath of the killings in the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* the day before and the killing of a police officer that same day. When the lights at the Eiffel Tower went off, the gunmen were still on the run, and a third terrorist was about to kill four hostages in a Jewish grocery store in Vincennes on Friday, January 9.

This disastrous outcome notwithstanding, switching off the lights at a public landmark was considered a gesture of collective grievance and resilience in the face of acts of violence that not only destroyed lives but touched at core values remaining from the great project of Western Enlightenment – namely, freedom of expression and secularism, scientific reason and the rule of truth, each emblematically associated with, well, light. ¹ Somewhat quirking the equation of light and truth, the world was called upon to "See the Eiffel Tower Go Dark in Honor of Paris Attack Victims," preferably in short online clips. ² As if this interruption of electric current transposed into GIF-like loops to be consulted at need or desire were the ultimate sovereign act, some powerful sign of control over image and infrastructure, a somber middle finger to Islamicist terror and the forces of darkness. The theatrics of contemporary city marketing were thus put into the service of the political symbolism of the West – and French republicanism in particular – yet they remained fundamentally ambiguous due to the unstable, fickle nature of light, its profuse functions and semantics.

A similar phallic darkening had taken place earlier that same week, on Monday, January 2, in Cologne, Germany, when the lights at the famous cathedral went off in another administrated statement of discontent and enforced urban communality. The historical irony of this prior dimming of public lighting has it that this gesture was directed against those who monger fear of foreigners and of Islam in particular. For the Cologne Cathedral was plunged into darkness in protest at a march by PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West), a grassroots, nationalist, anti-Muslim movement that had started in Dresden a few months before. "By switching off the floodlighting we want to



After the Eiffel Tower opened in 1899, it was described as “a simple and useless dark peak in the Paris night sky,” until the owners hired engineer Fernand Jacozzi to light it in spectacular fashion in 1925. This is his original design.

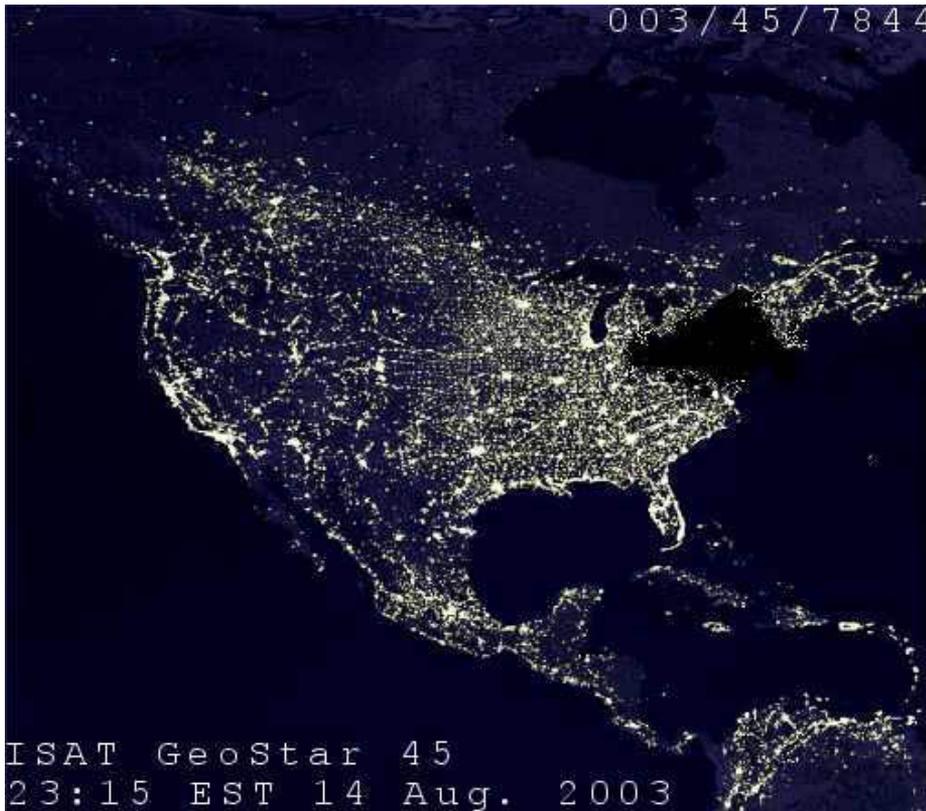
make those on the march stop and think,” the dean of the cathedral said. “It is a challenge: consider who you are marching alongside.”³ When trying to understand if not the logic then at least the intended meaning of such a denial of light, contradictions and inconsistencies abound. The lights of the touristic city become a sort of pledge that can be withdrawn (or played out) once the authorities stipulate that reducing the light is a clear statement (of anti-xenophobia, anti-terrorism, etc.). Relinquishing the splendor of well-conceived exterior lighting strategies thus is part of a performance of self-injury, a voluntary concession and temporary decrease of attractiveness in the service of the fight against a certain threat imposed on the community, the city, the nation, the West.

Usually, crime and evil are associated with the dark. A key feature of urban crime prevention is the lightening up of otherwise dark or poorly lit areas in the city. Security professionals speak of “good lighting” that promotes safety in the “twenty-four-hour city.”⁴ At the same time, such experts caution against lighting that would invite criminals to commit undesirable acts, as lighting may point the perpetrator to an opportunity to steal or kill. Hence lighting can be protective as well as danger-inflicting; it could work in favor of

a “sense” or “mood” of safety and as a guiding device for those interested in shattering it.

Taking into account the criminologist discourse on light and its lack, the dimming of the lights in the tourist cities of Paris and Cologne in January 2015 constituted not only administrated acts of public mourning or manifestations of an upstanding citizenry, but also sober admissions of the inevitability of what was to come. After all, wouldn't an Enlightenment tradition that believed in itself want to reassert the power and triumphalism of light – to turn it up? Is it a sign that this tradition is running out of energy, so to speak, and opting instead for a race to the bottom? To see who can go darker?⁵ Or do we need to evade such a crypto-Gnostic light/darkness dichotomy altogether? Alas, for the time being, this dichotomy (which is profoundly non-digital, non-computable, since light as well as darkness is infinitely differentiated and thus escapes any 1/0 logic) has proven to be rather unavoidable, if not to say a necessary prism to better apprehend the peculiar entanglement of politics, physics, economics, ecology, and religion in the present moment. Just consider the specific ways in which cities become objects of light/dark operations and how “productive” they are.

03/07



A satellite image of North America from August 14, 2003 shows the northeast blackout, the second-most widespread blackout in history at the time. A software bug in the alarm system at a control room of the FirstEnergy Corporation in Ohio was the blackout's primary cause. Image: NASA.

Blackouts in history have provided ample evidence as to how the sudden, temporary absence of electric light can become the moment of violence and looting as well as a utopian experience of unprecedented freedom. The collapse (or, in Jane Bennett's terms, the "agency") of the electrical power grid might entail a specific atmosphere of anarchic-Dionysian pleasure and risk-taking, such as during the infamous 1977 "Summer of Sam" New York blackout, commemorated by, among others, artist Katharina Sieverding in her monumental 1977 *The Great White Way Goes Black* photograph, and Spike Lee's 1999 movie *Summer of Sam*.⁶

Almost forty years later, on March 19, 2015, during the eighth WWF Earth Hour, the lights of over 1,400 landmarks and of close to forty UNESCO World Heritage sites went off in what has become, in the WWF's words, "the world's largest grassroots movement for the environment igniting public awareness and action on climate in more than 7,000 cities across the world."⁷ Put differently, the consensually orchestrated blackout has become one of the super-signifiers of climate awareness, responsible citizens' action, and moral superiority of those involved; moreover, it has unfolded into a highly practical, media-savvy way of displaying political initiative, ecologically as well as economically.

In Canada and the United States for instance, switching off the lights at public buildings has become a way to protect migratory birds from light pollution, while this purpose also helps the owners of these buildings to reduce energy costs. In 1993, FLAP, a Toronto-based organization that works to safeguard migratory birds in the urban environment, started raising awareness of the problem that lights, especially in high buildings, pose for birds, millions of which have become casualties of nighttime collisions with windows or died over the confusion and exhaustion caused by disorientation. Six years later, in 1999, the Audubon Society, pursuing the project of bird-friendly environments, established the first "Lights Out" program in Chicago. In April 2015, New York State joined in, though reasons not directly related to bird protection played their part. To the deputy director of communications for the environment at the New York governor's office, "Audubon's Lights Out Initiative and advocacy efforts dovetailed nicely with the energy conservation efforts underway at many state buildings."⁸ In other words, the effects that these measures have with regard to the visual appearance of the city's skyline don't go unnoticed: "New York's City Council is considering a measure to limit internal and

external lighting across the city's iconic skyline, mainly to help conserve energy – though Mayor Bill de Blasio's administration cited migratory birds as an extra reason to support the effort."

The established and expertly crafted (or, to the contrary, utterly contingent) shine (or glow) of a city or of an entire urban landscape is becoming contested when considerations alien to a certain image politics interfere. Two kinds of iconicity are meant to interact here: New York City's mythic nightscape, celebrated in countless movies and photographs, and the image of a climate-conscious community demonstrating its readiness to relinquish its love of artificial lighting. Actually approaching darkness – something almost unimaginable with regard to the idea and the reality of urban nights of the twenty-first century – has gained in appeal, rather surprisingly and on various levels. In the measure of the blackout, the (arguably counterintuitive) symbol politics of Paris and Cologne, with their simultaneously mournful and punishing dimensions (we honor the dead through our renunciation of light, as we take the light away from those who don't deserve it due to their acts or beliefs), meet with the economical concerns of city governments and private owners of high-rise buildings and with the wildlife preservation agendas of the WWF and Audubon.

After decades of ever-increasing illumination efforts for the sake of "the aesthetics" and to "view things for the better" (to quote the mayor of the city of Skopje, Macedonia, from a Philips brochure), images of darkened cityscapes, of a pitch-black Empire State Building, say, have been significantly augmented in their symbolic currency.⁹ At a time when the most efficient and energy-saving lighting technologies, namely LEDs, have become commonplace and are poised to change the visual impact of cities dramatically – stripping away the glare and the glow of neon or sodium-vapor and mercury-vapor street lamps to the point that movies shot at night will never look the same – the option of switching off the lights entirely seems odd yet perfectly reasonable.¹⁰

Now, the paradoxes occurring around the dimming of urban lighting are to be considered in the context of the symbolism and the politics of light and of darkness, respectively. The current upsurge in thinking around notions of darkness and blackness – from Reza Negarestani's cosmological speculations on Ahkt, the fallen black sun god of oil¹¹; to Eugene Thacker's meta-mystical musings on the unknowable "divine" (or "superlative") "darkness"¹² – provide a context, as does the reflection on the "fact of blackness" (Frantz Fanon) and its recent reformulations by Fred Moten, Lewis Gordon, Jared Sexton, and others, or the pursuit of the

04/07

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perfect black undertaken by a post-Malevich (and a post-Ad Reinhardt, post-James Lee Byars) artist such as Anish Kapoor.

The latter recently started to use Vantablack, the blackest pigment available, in his paintings, and he has explained how much he is interested in the (super-expensive) high tech noncolor whose nanostructure (Kapoor claims) is “so small that it virtually has no materiality,” resting “on the liminal edge between an imagined thing and an actual one,” hence being a “physical thing that you cannot see, giving it a transcendent or even transcendental dimension,” which, the artist thinks, “is very compelling.”¹³ Writing on Kapoor and other artists’ “work of black” before the invention of Vantablack by the British engineering firm Surrey Nanosystems, art historian Amy Stewart ventures that “as a color, black is all things and no thing: it represents the inability of an object to reflect light, to participate in the processes of illumination that govern all other things,” while being “loaded heavily with racial, historical, aesthetic, and philosophical connotations,” black should also be considered as “more than a color,” indeed as having “endless potential” and being tremendously “liberating.”¹⁴

The “work” that is being done by black is the

work of mourning and memory, an arguably effective work in the wake of death that brings Stewart to speak of a certain “brilliance of black.”¹⁵ A utopian brilliance or shine of sorts is indeed what is increasingly being searched for (and often believed to be found) in blackness. The peculiar glamor of Vantablack lies in its brutal, yet nano-granular, defiance of reflection and materiality. It keeps the memory of the way in which coal in the 1830s “gave up the entire spectrum of color, releasing the deposits of the past that had been locked in to its compact darkness,” as Esther Leslie writes in her study on synthetic color and the “poetics of coal” (“color glittered forth from blackness”).¹⁶

The scientific finding that coal’s darkness is not as dark and beyond color as one may think refers back, if obliquely, to the Gospel of John’s *et lux in tenebris lucet et tenebrae eam non conprehenderunt* (the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it). A particular virtue of darkness, religiously associated with evil and death, that could be put in the *et lux in tenebris* tradition was recently evoked by art historian T. J. Clark in his review of the 2014–15 exhibition of Rembrandt’s late paintings in the National Gallery in London:

05/07



A frame from an animated gif that has been shared under the hashtag Vantablack, the brand name of the world’s blackest material.

The darkness in Rembrandt (which has always perturbed those confronting him, whether they have chosen to valorize it or not) did have the look, in this world of raised eyebrows and faint smiles about puffy lips, of “doubt about the self and its motives” – the realm of the Protestant conscience, the world Erich Auerbach taught us to recognise as always “fraught with background” – but out of this background, all the brighter for emerging from the murk, seemed to come a final decisive exteriority to the soul, a materiality, a workmanship.¹⁷

The problem here is the difference between darkness and blackness. If Clark discovers in Rembrandt’s late paintings “a workmanship” as “emerging from the murk,” then the lights of heaven are still operating, if dimly – which, however, shouldn’t come as a big surprise in this artist’s case. The heavenly light is being repressed in Rembrandt’s chiaroscuro, only to be liberated in tiny doses of miraculous luminosity. Here, arguably more than in any other painter to date, the lack of light becomes the precondition for a celebration of light itself, and thus a reminder of the worldliness of the scenes depicted. Usefully, Alexander Galloway has pointed to the crucial difference between “two modalities of darkness,” the darkness “of this world” caused by a contingent obscuring of the Sun, the moon, and the stars, and the “cosmological” or “hermeneutic blackness” of a catastrophic “world without us,” separated from the “lux of heaven.”¹⁸ Contemporary experiments with darkness, from intentional blackouts in the service of public mourning or urban ecology to speculations on the absolute negations of an ontological blackness, are to be considered in relation to a growing interest in regulating moods and responding to catastrophe through the use of light or its absence. Financial traders speak of “dark pools” or “black pools” when securities are traded “off-market” in “non-displayed” private forums where the existing (“dark”) liquidity remains undisclosed to the more public markets of the stock exchange. Trader jargon and the violent repercussions of the second life of “dark pools” in the material world aside, the way in which darkness is embraced as a necessity in finance circles could serve as a model for the role darkness and blackness may play with regard to less harmful and more progressive claims of their potential.

Turning darkness into a public affair will probably go with a diminishment of the particular thrill and shine caused by the avoidance of transparency. But instead of merely continuing to ask for more transparency,

accountability, and disclosure, to the effect that transparency has become one of the more vacuous values around, the various modalities of darkness should be renegotiated with an eye toward those common futures when light will not only have become scarce or dangerous, but simply less desirable.

x

06/07

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07/07

e-flux journal #65 SUPERCOMMUNITY — may–august 2015 Tom Holert
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1
City lights have of course been turned out in the past (and in the recent past as well) to prevent nighttime bombing squadrons from being able to orient themselves and identify their squadrons by sight.

2
Noah Rayman, "See the Eiffel Tower Go Dark in Honor of Paris Attack Victims," *Time*, January 8, 2015 <http://time.com/3660314/eiffel-towers-lights-charlie-hebdo-terrorism-memorial/>

3
"Cologne Cathedral to Switch Off Lights in Protest at Anti-Muslim March," *The Guardian*, January 2, 2015 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/02/cologne-cathedral-switch-off-lights-protest-march-pegida>

4
"Good" here may also refer to the relevance of a certain tidiness of public lighting installations: "The aesthetic value of a lighting installation is an important consideration as the daytime street scene suffers greatly if fittings, materials, or paint finishes are of lesser quality. The shabby appearance of lighting street furniture can send the wrong signals to the community and contribute to a cycle of grime, crime and decline." See http://www.designagainstcrime.com/files/crimeframeworks/04_5i_framework.pdf

5
Thanks to Brian Kuan Wood for most of this paragraph's thoughts and formulations.

6
See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

7
"Millions Unite to Light the Way Toward Climate Action," WWF Earth Hour, March 29, 2015 <http://www.earthhour.org/millions-unite-light-the-way-toward-climate-action>

8
Shannon Palus, "New York Turns Out the Lights," Audubon.org, April 30, 2015 <https://www.audubon.org/news/new-york-turns-out-lights>

9
Philips Outdoor Lighting, *Case Study: Advanced Lighting Attracts Tourism and Commerce to Ancient Skopje*, 2014 http://www.lighting.philips.com/content/dam/b2b-li/en_AA/Experience/cases/Skopje-city/Case_Study_Skopje_Macedonia_spread.pdf

10
Dave Kendrick, "Why Hollywood Will Never Look the Same Again on Film: LEDs Hit the Streets of LA & NY," *No Film School*, February 1, 2014 <http://nofilmschool.com/2014/02/why-hollywood-will-never->

look-the-same-again-on-film-leds-in-la-ny; Geoff Manaugh, "How LED Streetlights Will Change Cinema (And Make Cities Look Awesome)," *Gizmodo*, February 3, 2014 <http://gizmodo.com/led-streetlights-will-change-hollywood-and-make-every-city-1514840416>; Ellie Violet Bramley, "Street Lights, Camera, Action: How LEDs Are Changing the Look of Films," *The Guardian*, October 24, 2014 <http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2014/oct/24/street-lights-camera-action-led-look-films-neon-movies>

11
Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (Melbourne: re.press, 2008).

12
Eugene Thacker, "Darklife: Negation, Nothingness, and the Will-to-Life in Schopenhauer," *Parrhesia* 12 (2011) 12--27 http://parrhesiajournal.org/parrhesia12/parrhesia12_thacker.pdf; and Eugene Thacker, *Starry Speculative Corpse: Horror of Philosophy* (Hampshire, UK: John Hunt Publishing, 2015).

13
Quoted in Julian Elias Bronner, "Anish Kapoor: 500 Words," *Artforum*.com, April 3, 2015 <http://artforum.com/words/id=51395>. Thanks to Ben Thorp Brown for making me aware of Kapoor's use of Vantablack.

14
Amy Stewart, "The Work of Black," *Drain* vol. 10, no. 1 (2013) <http://drainmag.com/the-work-of-black/>

15
Ibid.

16
Esther Leslie, *Synthetic Worlds: Nature, Art and the Chemical Industry* (London: Reaktion, 2005), 46.

17
T. J. Clark, "World of Faces," *London Review of Books*, vol. 36, no. 23 (December 4, 2014): 16–18.

18
Alexander R. Galloway, "What Is a Hermeneutic Light?" in *Leper Creativity: Cyclonopedia Symposium*, ed. Ed Keller, Nicola Masciandro, and Eugene Thacker (New York: Punctum, 2012), 170.