

# NOTHING TO SEE? PAYING ATTENTION IN THE DARK ENVIRONMENT

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## ABSTRACT

A cloudy November evening deep in an old forest. It is really dark, and I try to observe my environment. I discern the difference between the treetops and the dark sky and the snow-covered ground. Everything else is formless. My vision is quite useless, and the other senses are weak in these circumstances. Only the background hum is audible and most aromas are erased by the freezing temperature. In a winter outfit, all I can feel is the moving air on my face. Yet, this is not sensory deprivation, there are things to observe. What is it possible to discern when the visual stimulus is minimized? This article focuses on the aesthetic experience of darkness by analyzing a visit to a deep natural darkness and attempts to connect this distinct case to aesthetic theory. The emphasis is on the descriptive analysis of the challenges of seeing in the darkness.

## KEYWORDS

Darkness, Visual Perception, Aesthetic Experience, Atmosphere, Burke

It is a cloudy evening on November 25th, 2019. I have walked deep into an old forest to see real darkness. I am more than a kilometer from the road and twenty from the nearest streetlights. The darkness is nearly pitch black as I try to observe my surroundings. I can perceive some nearby forms and the dark gray sky, as well as the snow-covered ground from the trunks. Everything else is formless. I am trying to figure out what is possible to discern here when the sensory stimulus is minimal. Yet this is not sensory deprivation; there are things to observe. My notion is that despite minimal visual cues, the experience in the dark environment is predominantly a visual experience. However, its distinct visuality and the role of other senses are not immediately clear.

### SENSING IN THE DARK

The visual faculty of *Homo sapiens* is not very efficient in the dark—vision is weaker in the dark, and perception differs from under daylight conditions. Adaptation to low-light conditions starts during the first seconds, but becoming fully accustomed to the dark environment takes half an hour, even more. Adaptation enhances seeing in the dark, but it has effects. First, colors are muffled if not converted to grayscale, as the rod cells dominating the visual observation in darkness are not color sensitive. Second, all the defects of vision are accentuated, as the irises are dilated to the maximum in the dark environment. This, for instance, accentuates myopia as the depth of field decreases. As a result of visual adaptation, we can see in the dark, but the view is less colorful and less accurate than during the daytime.<sup>1</sup>

There is no doubt that darkness is an aesthetic experience. Yet aesthetic theory does not provide much assistance in perceiving darkness. Generally, darkness has been considered a background highlighting aesthetically significant celestial events, such as the starry sky and the Milky Way.<sup>2</sup> Aesthetic thinking of darkness is clearly counterintuitive, as the discipline is mostly based on visual perception and in the dark, there is nothing to see. The aesthetic without light is incomplete. Thus, darkness itself has not been a noteworthy subject for most philosophers. Edmund Burke's ideas about darkness and blackness in the context of terror, painful experiences, and the sublime are rare instances that provide some cues to sense the dark forest, as he sees darkness as an obscure and confusing substance.<sup>3</sup> Burke believes that the intrinsic obscurity makes perceiving utter darkness a painful experience, while the uncertainty and confusion caused by it predisposes one to

imaginational and real threats concealed in the blackness, which are adequate responses to encountering darkness.<sup>4</sup>

Contemporary studies in aesthetics have not elaborated on the aesthetics of dark environments and thus do not provide direct assistance. However, some recent approaches to aesthetically unexciting situations can further the aesthetic understanding of darkensses without the sublime quality. For instance, experiences of every day and the weather can deal with conditions that can be relevant in the context of darkness.<sup>5</sup> Developing context-sensitive aesthetic qualities that assist in describing distinct situations is a method used in everyday aesthetics, which I consider useful in the context of darkness.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, understanding the wider importance of an uninteresting condition can generate an aesthetic meaning for it.<sup>7</sup>

#### PAYING ATTENTION IN DARKNESS

My excursion into the dark forest is comparable to Tim Edensor's visit to Galloway Forest Dark Sky Park in an attempt to obtain an understanding of the experience of natural darkness.<sup>8</sup> There are differences in our observations in the dark environments, but there are also significant similarities. We are both European, middle-aged, reasonably fit males with some knowledge of uninhabited areas and dark environments. Both excursions were accompanied by an associate to share the experience and for safety. Thus, darkness does not appear to us as intimidating but as a stimulating variant of the habitual world. In addition, being accompanied enhances the safety of roaming through a dark forest, as well as softens the imaginary developments in the woods.

Edensor's outing occurred in a place reserved for experiencing darkness and starry skies. During his visit, the night was clear, and the temperature was mild. Infrastructure such as a walking path marked with light-colored material assisted in the exploration of the dark environment. My nightly outing took place during Finnish winter in an untouched forest under the cloud cover. Because of the dense forest and utter blackness, we used dim lighting while traversing through the forest towards the observation point.

Edensor observed the darkness while moving through the previously unknown landscape and surfaces, while I had familiarized myself with the area during the daytime. Furthermore, it was his

first intentional visit to a naturally dark environment, and he and his company were not alone exploring Galloway Forest, whereas I had previous natural darkness experiences and I knew that my companion and I were the only humans in the forest. Although we had visited the same spot in the daylight, it was almost impossible to recognize it in the dark. Only the slight traces of our snowshoes proved that we had been there before.

The warmer climate emphasized Edensor's observations of a multisensory dimension. He underlines the visual element analogous to my observations but hears, smells and feels much more than I did. He was able to discern the scents and sounds at a detailed level, even though "using hearing, touch and smell [...] required more patience and intimacy than sight."<sup>9</sup> For me, the northern wintry forest appeared quiet as the animals stayed covered to save energy and birds were less active. The only sounds to my spot originated from the snow and wind. Hard-packed snow made crunching sounds when moving. In the background, there was some audible hum of the wind itself and a creak from trees touching each other. All the sounds were somewhat muffled, as the woolen cap covered my ears. In addition to the sounds of nature, I could hear my companion pouring tea a few steps away. The cold temperature erased most of the odors. I cannot recollect smelling anything, just having a recognizable sensation of cold inside my nose.

Edensor was able to profoundly consider his somatic experience. For instance, he experienced the boundaries of his body becoming obscure since they were not visible, giving a feeling of connectedness with the surroundings. Moving along the path required wariness and communication in the darkest parts.<sup>10</sup> My proprioceptive sense was affected because of snowshoes that changed my movement and balance. Moreover, nearly all visual cues normally assisting balance were hidden by the darkness. The situation forced me to move with caution and stay in the small area I was familiar with. Despite the condition, I did not feel insecure, just different. I felt that my sensuous connection with the environment was partially muted but not especially unusual, apart from the lack of visual perception. Unlike Edensor, the perimeter of my body was clear, as I felt the contact between my skin and the garments and the clothing felt like a barrier preventing me from reaching out.

Edensor's mobile mode of observation had an effect on the tactile, as well as proprioceptive, experience. Being on the move opened

various vistas along his route, while I observed the same featureless spot in dense woods. Unlike Edensor, I was not exploring unknown terrain. Before this particular visit to the forest, I spent several weeks at Mustarinda artist residency, walking distance from my observation spot. On the first nights at the residency, the blackness of the dense and practically untouched forest felt overwhelming and intimidating. I could barely force myself to leave the building and enter the woods after dark. Nightly outings in the vicinity of the house assisted with adapting to the deep darkness. The blackness of the night never normalized. But eventually, I adapted, and it became part of my every day. Contrary to my gradual acclimatization, exploring the dark night was a unique event for Edensor, which becomes apparent in his description of the overwhelmingly dynamic sky and wonderment.<sup>11</sup>

Edensor's account is accurate but limited to just one situation, while I had become aware of most qualities of the dark environment before the visit analyzed here. Acquainting with darkness provided me with some benefits, as well as weaknesses. Being used to darkness allowed me to pay attention to less obvious details but made me ignore other significant qualities. Yet both Tim Edensor and I recognized the special quality of sensing in the dark that directed our observations.

Even though both Edensor and I used the whole array of senses to feel the night, our visual observations—and lack of them—were emphasized in the experience. In spite of finding our eyesight almost useless in the dark, we both felt that the visual still dominates observations. The specific characteristics of our observations resulted partially from the human sensory system and partially from our differing circumstances. The declination of visual ability usually leads to the amplification of other senses, but as I noticed, the effect of the distinct circumstances can work against this. Comparing the manner Edensor and I focused attention on the dark environment brings forth two approaches with differing foundations and expands the scope of possible methods of examining the dark environment, as well as highlighting the significant features we both found in darkness.

#### EXPERIENCING DARKNESS AESTHETICALLY

The approach employed in my writing draws from Arnold Berleant's<sup>12</sup> descriptive aesthetics that emphasize the focus on the perception, along with the felt experience and suppression of the

known facts about the environment's biology, history and so on. While the location of my observations was special, I attempted to bracket the detailed data about the biology of an untouched sub-arctic forest or my knowledge of local folklore. My priority was to acutely describe the naturally dark environment and analyze it as a multisensory experience in order to enlarge the aesthetic understanding of this distinct darkness. In addition, I attempted to investigate the dilemmas of paying attention to a hardly discernible environment. Naturally, it is impossible to totally overlook the knowledge of the northern forests and their wildlife, as well as the knowledge of the physiology of the human eye and the ability to see in low-light conditions.

Although darkness as a physical phenomenon is always the same, I am willing to think of it as *darknesses*, in plural, because of the aesthetic differences resulting from the environment and transitional conditions creating varying atmospheres. I see darkness forming a medium between the perceiver and their environment creating a distinct ambience. Both what you see (or do not see) and know about the location and environment of a particular darkness have an effect on its aesthetics.<sup>13</sup>

An attempt to see in the dark forces one to pay special attention to the environment. In my experience, one simultaneously makes an effort to observe the environment through darkness and fails in it. Despite any effort, darkness blocks the observation at the edge of the sensory system. In an environment where only tiny cues exist, the desire to perceive something surpasses the interest, the darkness forcing one to glimpse at anything at all just to detect something. During my excursion, I noticed that when an attempt to see something in the dark expanse in between the trees turned out impossible, my eyes searched for something less challenging and unintentionally turned upwards to see some contrast between the treetops and the cloudy sky. This probably resembles the painful experience of looking into utter darkness Burke discusses. However, the advances in natural sciences, combined with contemporary cultural understanding, have conditioned me to view darkness differently from Burke's original idea of darkness as terrifying. Furthermore, my extended experience of darkness has faded its novelty and tamed the naturally dark environments.<sup>14</sup>

Considering the visual quality of the darkness itself, my observation point, lacking distinct features, could have been somewhere

else. Yet sensing in the dark differs from closing the eyes. When you close your eyes, you do not see, but it is not real darkness. Closed eyes make you turn inwards, into your thoughts and visions. In the forest, I was still connected to the surrounding space. I was in the world, visually isolated by the fabric of darkness, but I did not feel the darkness as nothingness. The deep darkness was not an impenetrable veil, but it allowed me to discern and feel something. In spite of my limited vision, being enclosed in a pristine forest is simultaneously special and hides its specialty. My awareness of the quality of the surrounding forest had an effect on the atmosphere. My vision was useless, and still, it was worth an attempt to see.

Despite the prolonged period in the dark, all I could identify were some obscure entities as different tones: the paleness of the snowy ground, the dark mass of trees and the dark gray sky above. The clouds turned the minimal illumination flat, and the snow cover transformed the nearby objects into vague masses. While the moment had a character of its own, I did not think that this darkness was out of the ordinary, and it definitely did not feel sublime. A general understanding is that novelty and the sublime are connected, and consequently, my prolonged stay in the area with daily exposure to darkness wore out the freshness of this environment. The mild touch of awe I felt during this excursion resulted from a combination of the night, the ancient forest and, most importantly, knowing that this would be my last time in these woods.

Instead of analyzing the aesthetic taxonomy of dark environments, I wanted to focus on the distinct qualities of paying attention to darkness. One can find denser darkness in a windowless room, but this natural environment provided an opportunity to encounter darkness that creates a distinct atmosphere close to historical nights. I see that exploring dark environments provides an opportunity to develop aesthetic sensitivity and attention to extreme sensing. One just needs to be open to darkness, thereby willing to embrace the shadows and allow the void to be meaningful.

- 1 Daniel Kernell, *Colours and Colour Vision. An Introductory Survey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), chapter 4.
- 2 Taylor Stone, "The Value of Darkness: A Moral Framework for Urban Nighttime Lighting," *Science and Engineering Ethics*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (2018): 608, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11948-017-9924-0>.
- 3 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 1757, Sect. XIV-XVIII (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014 [1759]). Emily Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 25.
- 4 Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 99–101, 273–275.
- 5 Yuriko Saito, "The Aesthetics of Emptiness: Sky Art," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, Vol. 29 (2011). <https://doi.org/10.1068/d8909>. Mădălina Diaconu, "Longing for Clouds—Does Beautiful Weather Have to Be Fine?" *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Vol. 13 (2015).
- 6 Thomas Leddy, "Everyday Surface Aesthetic Qualities: 'Neat,' 'Messy,' 'Clean,' 'Dirty.'" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (1995), <https://doi.org/10.2307/431351>.
- 7 Mădălina Diaconu, "Longing for Clouds - Does Beautiful Weather have to be Fine?" *Contemporary Aesthetics*, vol. 13 (2015).
- 8 Tim Edensor, "Reconnecting with Darkness: Gloomy Landscapes, Lightless Places," *Social & Cultural Geography*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (2013): 454–459, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2013.790992>.
- 9 Edensor, "Reconnecting with Darkness," 457.
- 10 Edensor, "Reconnecting with Darkness," 456.
- 11 Edensor, "Reconnecting with Darkness," 455.
- 12 Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 26–29.
- 13 Gernot Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, ed. Jean-Paul Thibault (London: Routledge, 2017), 25–26.
- 14 Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 278–281. Cf. also Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*, 185, regarding the effect of technological means.