

Optical Fibre or A Critical Social History of Light

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Abstract

The author reflects on the modern history of light from Descartes (natural light) through Walter Benjamin (light of lanterns and lamps) until Eben Moglen (modern technologies based on optical fibre). The main purpose of this text is to give outline of a modern, critical social history of light. The author's primary concern is the relationship between light and power and knowledge alongside the process of lighting understood as observation (surveillance) and information (awareness). The metaphor of light allows to trace the dialectic of Enlightenment mired in the figure of hunter, panoptic apparatus, and modern wearable technologies. The fundamental idea is that the beam of light is as enlightening as it is blinding. This perspective allows the author to reconstruct genealogy of progress in which light is as much the emancipator as it is a police interrogator. Finally, reflections on the concept of phenomenon and semblance attempt to transcend limitations of the two major 20th century paradigms in thinking; phenomenology and psychoanalysis. The former deals with what is displayed or illuminated (phenomena) and the latter with what is overexposed (traumas). The author seeks to transcend the two paradigms of speculative philosophy on matter and memory in Bergson. Conclusions are of theoretical and political nature. The latter challenge the idea of the public sphere being the realm of the visible while the former question established belief that knowledge is but seeing formatted by concepts.

Keywords: light, panopticism, optical fibre, hunter, phenomenon