

**Light Touches: Cultural Practices of Illumination, London 1780-1840**

**Submitted by Alice Barnaby to the University of Exeter as a thesis for  
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## **Abstract**

In the last decades of the eighteenth century, urban lives were touched by a series of innovations in the technology and aesthetics of illumination. Unfamiliar combinations of new fuel sources and auxiliary equipment (for example, curtains, blinds, glass, mirrors and lampshades) meant that cities looked and felt different during both the day and the night. The spheres of elite, popular, public and private culture explored, exploited and were fascinated by the cultural value of light. Through four case studies in the aesthetics of urban illumination, my thesis demonstrates how the acquisition of skills for the manipulation of transparent and reflective surfaces were crucial when negotiating a balance between self-expression and standards of taste, morality, gender and class. Rather than relying upon canonical examples of the period's fascination with light, such as the high Romantic idealization of nature's sunrises and sunsets, my thesis investigates more everyday encounters with light in the built environment: the fashionably genteel pastime of transparent painting; the gendering of light to design both domestic interiors and female identity; the appropriation of patrician top-lighting for public buildings of education and exhibition; and the popularity of illuminated spectacles in commercial pleasure gardens. I argue that these new possibilities of lighting temporarily enabled new possibilities of subjectivity. My historical phenomenology suggests that the formation of perception between 1780 and 1840 was actively directed towards changes in the world through a finely-attuned consciousness of light.

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