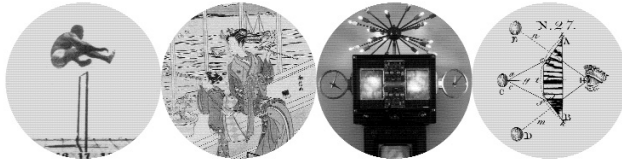


journal of visual culture



The Burning Mirror: Photography in an Ambivalent Light

Melissa Miles

Abstract

Photography's etymology as light-writing is characterized by certain assumptions about the stability and transparency of light which underpin the relationship between light, truth and presence that deeply informs photography's ontology and epistemology. Foreclosed in this photological schema is light's disruptive potential. This article invokes a burning mirror to direct this capricious light onto photography, and to refigure light as an agent of excess in the medium. The photographic phenomena of lens flare, over-exposure and solarization embody points at which these ambivalent inscriptions of light converge, and will offer a means of developing an alternative approach to photographic theory.

Keywords

burning mirror • glare • Luce Irigaray • light • photography

In his 1864 practical photography guide, *The Camera and the Pencil: or, The Heliographic Art*, Marcus Aurelius Root recommends that as the sun is the generative agent of photography, the photographer should aspire to 'master whatever is known concerning it' (1864: 49). To these ends, Root dedicates a chapter to 'The Sunbeam' in which he recounts Isaac Newton, Thomas Young and Augustine Fresnel's researches on the nature of light. 'The Sunbeam' is an exuberant celebration of the many generative possibilities of sunlight drawn from a variety of fields including physics, optics, botany, psychiatry and veterinary science. Solar radiance is variously presented as a source of beauty and inspiration, and a prerequisite for the health and well-being of humans, animals and plants alike. However, in an extraordinary passage in which he describes the necessity of sunlight to the life of plants, Root alludes to another, more volatile aspect of sunlight:

[Plant growth is contingent upon] the noiseless agency of light; that soft, delicate substance (if *substance* we may name it) which, launched in floods from its parent orb, and hurrying earthward with thoughts own speed, impinges against that most exquisitely sensitive of organs, the eye, without causing any other sensations than those of refreshment and delight. (1864: 56; emphasis in original)

Although light is 'launched' from the parent sun with the violent force of a 'flood', it is curiously defused as it touches delicately upon the human eye. This metaphorical mollification of the sun's penetrating intensity is reiterated in a footnote in which Root quotes an unnamed 'modern writer':

Not only does light fly from the sun with a velocity a million and a half times greater than that of a cannon-ball, but it darts from every reflecting surface with like velocity, and reaches the tender structure of the eye so gently, that, as it falls upon the little web of nerves there spread to receive it, it imparts the most pleasing sensations. (1864: 56)

In a remarkable reversal, Root's chapter implicitly acknowledges the volatile and capricious character of its subject only to disavow its potentially violent impact upon the observer. True to its author's aspirations of 'mastering' sunlight, this text ultimately transforms the fiery orb into a gloriously stable and knowable source of light and life.

These tricky sidesteps and discursive twists reflect many of the contradictions and paradoxes which more broadly pervade the history of western philosophy as a photology. Like the light of the sun, the law of the logos is ambivalent and equally capable of blinding and enlightening those within its scope. However, continually privileged in the language of *En-light-enment* is an originary and generative light. The notion of a stable and coherent luminosity permeates philosophical discourses where light serves as a transparent medium in which truth and the objective world are revealed. Light unveils, clarifies, illuminates and makes the world around us perceptible and knowable. Jacques Derrida underscores the reliance of metaphysics on the language of light in *Writing and Difference* where he famously argues that the metaphor of light and darkness is 'the founding metaphor of Western philosophy as metaphysics' (1978: 27). Similarly, Eduardo Cadava maintains that metaphors of light structure the very language of philosophy and history, and posits that all writing is *photo-graphic*:

There has never been a time without the photograph, without the residue and writing of light. If in the beginning we find the Word, the Word has always been a Word of light, the 'let there be light' without which there would be no history. (1997: 5)

From its very beginnings, photography too has been built on this language of light. The British inventor of the positive-negative process, William Henry Fox Talbot, repeatedly drew on the life-giving qualities of light to describe his

fledgling process. The printed catalogue which accompanied Talbot's 1839 exhibition of photogenic drawings introduces his 'images obtained by the direct action of light' (reprinted in Weaver, 1992: 57). Talbot reaffirms the significance of light as the generative origin of his photogenic drawings in the introduction to Part I of his book *The Pencil of Nature*: 'It may suffice, then, to say, that the places of this work have been obtained by the mere action of Light upon sensitive paper' (reprinted in Weaver, 1992: 75). Similar references to 'works of light', 'pictures of light' (Eastlake, 1857: 84, 86), 'sunbeam art' (T.S. Arthur, quoted in Root, 1864: 5) and 'portraits drawn by beams of light' (Friese-Green, quoted in Green-Lewis, 1996: 44) saturate 19th-century writings on photography. In this borrowed light, photographs became documents of truth in which that apparently natural and extra-discursive agent transferred a trace of the 'thing itself' directly and precisely onto the photographic emulsion. Exemplified by Oliver Wendell Holmes's (1863: 73) allusion to 'the honest sunshine' to describe photography's truth value, the 'natural' creativity of the sun lent the medium its candour and integrity, and formed the bridge that connected photographs to the 'real'.

Striking in these many and varied references to 'sun-painting' and 'works of light' is the way in which multiple and often contradictory metaphors of light and the sun are invoked interchangeably to reiterate the luminous foundations of photographic image-making and foreclose on the volatile aspects of sunlight. The multidimensional character of this source of truth and creativity is encapsulated in the sheer variety of metaphors used in a promotional label for an early French daguerreotype made by Bryon Dorgeval:

The image, which fixes on the mirror the shadow itself of the sitter, preserving their very smile, their exact glance – is it not to our eyes sweeter, more sacred than the work on canvas? A miniature is the work of a painter – the daguerrean proof is the work of God. How much more would it be cherished by the parent, or a friend, for it is the reflection of the shadow, the thought, the deeds of the sitter's soul united with God by the power of light. (quoted in Nickel, 2002: 136)

The light of God, the light of truth, the inner light of the subject's soul and optical discourses of light's reflective characteristics are among the many luminous metaphors which converge in this promotion of the new medium. Similarly, Root invokes the light of God in his book and thereby locates the principal agent for photography in a realm beyond the limits of both discourse and matter: 'For certainly there is no other *created* object, which images so variously and vividly the *uncreated* Creator' (1864: 49). In Root's text, as in Dorgeval's description of daguerreotypy, diverse discourses are brought into a confused and tense relation by the overarching desire to privilege light as a stable, pre-existent and productive origin for photography.

Such originary myths of light-writing are not confined to the 19th century. The persistence of photography's luminous origin is evident in the countless contemporary photography monographs, exhibitions and histories that invoke photography's etymology as light-writing to appeal to light's timeless

and metaphysical qualities. Robert J. Hirsch's (2000) *Seizing the Light: A History of Photography*, Gael Newton's (1988) *Shades of Light*, A.D. Coleman's (1979) *Light Readings: A Photography Critic's Writings 1968–1978* and Timothy Dow Adams' (2000) *Light Writing and Life Writing: Photography and Autobiography* are among the seemingly endless list of book titles that draw romantic connotations from photography's dependence on light. The National Gallery of Cleveland stressed the mystical qualities of light in the title of its 1993 exhibition, 'Magicians of Light', and the organizers of the 2003 University of Texas conference, 'At First Light: Niépce and the Dawn of Photography', drew on ordinary metaphors of light to reaffirm the status of Niépce's heliograph as the 'first' photograph. In a circular movement which proceeds from and returns to an apparently natural and extra-discursive luminous origin, one metaphorical system reinforces others and simultaneously delimits the possibility of an excessive or disruptive inscription of light from entering photographic discourse.

Such patterns of foreclosing on the destructive potential of light can be understood in terms of Luce Irigaray's (1974) theory of philosophical language as a shield against these blinding excesses. In her analysis of Plato's simile of the cave, Irigaray (1974: 241–364) identifies a filial relation between the light that emanates from the fire within the cave and the light of truth beyond its confines. This relationship is grounded in the prisoners' dependence upon systems of representation to disavow fetishistically the capacity of light to dazzle, blind and burn. Although Plato's simile suggests certain spatial and philosophical divisions between the realm of images within the cave and that of thought under the sun, the relationship that Irigaray establishes between the sun and his various sons, both within and outside the cave, corrupts Plato's notion of the idea or Forms with that of *doxa*, illusion and shadows.¹

This transgressive, filial relation that connects incongruous metaphors of light deeply informs my own theory of photography. This theory must be distinguished from conventional approaches to Plato's simile in the medium's history and theory. The obvious likeness between the cave's darkened interior, into which images are projected by the agency of light, and the camera obscura has led to the popular deployment of Plato's simile as a philosophical precursor to the photographic. Susan Sontag famously opens her book, *On Photography*, with a chapter titled 'In Plato's Cave', in which she argues that photographs have changed 'the terms of confinement in the cave' by offering a seemingly infinite variety of faithful traces of the world to be avidly consumed as the real (1977: 3). Sontag's chapter is indicative of the way in which Plato's simile functions in photographic discourse to mark a gap between truth and image, and between the real and representation. Likened to the shadows in Plato's cave, photographs are presented as reproductions or projections of the real world. In sharp contrast, I seek to problematize this gap between photographic representations and the 'real' by emphasizing their common dependence on certain metaphors of light as a stable and revelatory agent, and their fetishistic disavowal of those luminous excesses which dazzle and burn.

An ambivalent approach to photography's luminous origin ensures that its most persistent metaphors can be better understood as deeply troubled by an unresolved, highly unstable and corruptible ground. This heliotropic instability² is not only evident in Root's (1864) miraculous dispersion of the violent luminous 'floods' which issue from the sun, but is imbued in discourses which popularly invoke photography as a tool for mastering and tempering the volatile and unpredictable character of light. Daguerre's exclamation upon his invention of daguerreotypy, 'I have seized the light' (quoted in McQuire, 1988: 27), captured the imagination of early writers on photography. A passage in Népomucène Lemercier's 1839 poem '*Lampélie et Daguerre*' celebrates this photographer's ability to 'trap' and control this luminous creative force:

As, menaced by the birdcatcher's pitiless nets,
The meadowlark, rousing the muses of the morning,
Flutters and foolishly comes alight on a
Lark-mirror, reef of the dalliances,
So Lampélie's flight is cut short
By the chemical snare of Daguerre.
The face of a crystal, convex or concave,
Will reduce or enlarge every object it marks.
Its fine, lucid rays, through the depths of the traps,
Catch the aspect of places in rapid inscription:
The image imprisoned within the glass plate,
Preserved from all threatening contact,
Retains its bright life; and certain reflections
Break through to the most distant spheres.
(quoted in Benjamin, 1982: 675)

The language of light's pursuit and entrapment permeates this poem: the 'chemical snare of Daguerre' interrupts the sun's 'flight' and 'traps' its 'fine, lucid rays' to 'catch' an aspect or scene. Amy Baker Sandback reinscribes this metaphor of entrapment and containment in her more recent observation about photography: 'After one hundred and fifty years, we are still trying to trap light to our satisfaction' (1989: 106). Although the capriciousness of light is not made explicit in these texts, implicit in these notions of mastery and entrapment are allusions to light's unpredictable and elusive characteristics. Importantly, these luminous excesses lurk at the heart of light-writing, where they may be teased out to foster a new approach to the medium.

The stakes are high in my excavation of light's formerly neglected ambivalences. Some of the defining characteristics of the medium are contingent upon the repudiation of these excesses. As in Plato's cave, where the sensible is progressively abstracted from the intelligible world until the sun can be observed without any material or sensible support, the authority of photography as an index or direct trace of the 'real' is grounded in the effacement of the productive movement between light and photography's material and technological support. Like the dualism sensible/intelligible, the

photograph and the 'real' are forced into a binary logic. Within photography's heliocentric schema the neglect of the mutually constitutive movement between these terms, as well as the apparent presence of the object depicted in the photograph, are secured and sustained by certain assumptions about the transparency of light. Although light is the means by which other things appear it also lacks a means of manifesting itself. In other words, light is incapable of announcing its own presence, and may only be inferred as it refracts and reflects off the surfaces and vapours which constitute our environments. As a simultaneous movement of revelation and withdrawal, our experience of light is always interrupted and deferred. At the moment of revelation, that which is revealed also conceals the means by which the revelation took place. Consequently, there is a difficulty, both in the studies of light and in photography, in naming both what appears to be present and what makes it present. This problematic lies at the heart of the opposition between modernist and postmodernist histories, which polarizes photography's ontology and epistemology and, rather than seeking to reconcile these binary terms, has historically privileged either the unique properties of the medium or the photograph's status as a text (see Batchen, 1999 for more on this issue). In contrast, my recovery of light's volatility will emphasize the productive interrelationship between these terms and the impossibility of relying on light to structure such problematic binary schemes.

The burning mirror after which this article is named provides a means of fostering this inclusive discursive movement. As a concave mirror which collects and focuses the rays of the sun to maximize its potential for destruction, the burning mirror is a symbol of the extremes to which the solar origin can be pushed. Drawing on Irigaray's (1974: 144–6, 301–2) double inscription of the *miroir ardent* as a speculum,³ I argue that the burning mirror is not a weapon of fiery destruction but a tool which can be employed to open up an alternative theoretical realm for photography. In Irigaray's (1974) text, the strategic insertion of this concave mirror into Plato's cave/womb foregrounds a logic which exceeds its economy of filiation. The speculum/burning mirror provides access to the passage between the cave's interior and exterior which is disavowed when Plato's simile is read in terms of an opposition between the cave's artificially lit interior and external light of truth. Termed the 'forgotten vagina' (1974: 345) by Irigaray, this intermediary zone is:

The passage that is missing, left on the shelf, between the outside and inside, between the plus and the minus. With the result that all divergencies will finally be proportions, functions, relations that can be referred back to *sameness*. (1974: 247)⁴

I must stress that the burning mirror does not rely on a strategy of reversal in which the cave's formerly neglected interior becomes the privileged term and its exterior the subordinated one. Rather, a double perspective is sought in this model. As it foregrounds the formerly neglected passage through

which binary terms are not only connected but produced, the speculum undermines the relations of resemblance which delimits these terms.

However, particularly pertinent to my own theoretical interests in the excessive possibilities of light is the way in which Irigaray draws on a language of fire and immolation to describe these processes. The speculum/burning mirror both concentrates the powers of the sun to illumine the secret depths of the cave and, when angled correctly, set its photoglogical schemes ablaze:

In this fire, in this light, in the optical failure, the impossibility of gazing on their encounters in flames, the split (schize) founding and structuring the difference between experience and transcendental (especially phallic) eminence will burn also. (1974: 145)

The blinding light that surges from the burning mirror is a force of ambivalence which cannot be reconciled with photological terms, and refuses to stand in reflective opposition to either light, darkness, representation or 'real'. As both and neither, it exists beyond this matrix of resemblance as a dazzling and multifaceted force. With the use of the burning mirror, I will invoke photographic history and theory's formerly disavowed solar ambivalences to augment the relationship between light and photography, and generate a new, multidimensional mode of visual analysis.

The burning mirror's capacity to flood Plato's darkened cave with a blinding concentration of light and ignite its binary economy in a dramatic crucible resonates with the effects of lens flare within the photographic camera. No longer simply a *mirror with a memory* (Holmes, (1980[1859]): 54, original emphasis), the photograph marked by lens flare is wrested by an ambivalent and excessive light from the problematic expectation that it should accurately reflect the 'real'. The title of Steve Meltzer's (2001) practical photography article, 'Truth or Glare', underscores the incompatibility of notions of photographic truth with lens flare. Meltzer's advice for craft workers on how to prevent hot spots and reflections when photographing their work suggests that light is only capable of revealing truth when it has been mechanically neutralized and stabilized. Unlike the coherent and predictable light desired by Meltzer, the capricious, non-image-forming light of lens flare floods through the camera's aperture, overflows and bounces uncontrollably off its lens and interior surfaces to ultimately 'degrade' the image.⁵ Despite the popular use of techniques and technologies which have been devised to master this destructive force, such as coating lenses with magnesium fluoride, lens hoods and the application of a light-absorbent flat black finish to the lens barrel and camera's interior, light remains a slippery collaborator in photography.

Like the burning mirror, lens flare must not be understood simply in terms of destruction or immolation, but rather as a means through which light can return as a shifting and destabilizing force within the matrix of presence, form and truth in photography. The contemporary Japanese photographer,

Tokihiro Sato, actively courts these luminous excesses and invites their transgressions into his work. The iridescent spots and streaks of flared light which appear throughout Sato's *Photo-respirations* (1997; Figure 1) interrupt the photograph's otherwise accurate reproduction of its referent with an alternative photographic reality.

Sato uses a large format 8 x 10 camera on a sturdy tripod and a neutral density filter to facilitate his use of extraordinarily long exposure settings. During this long exposure, which can reach three hours, Sato moves into the camera's field of view and, at various points within the field, uses either a penlight or a hand-held mirror to shine light directly back at the camera. A reflective triangular frame is mounted around the camera lens to allow Sato to see whether the light is being accurately reflected at its target. The result is a series of luminescent lines, squiggles or dots scattered throughout the pictorial space.

The light which both constitutes and interrupts Sato's *Photo-respirations* exceeds the duplicating function of photography by replicating and disrupting the photographic representation of the scene. Importantly, these



Figure 1 Tokihiro Sato, *Photo-respiration* # 22 (1989). Gelatin-silver print, 41.9 x 58.4 cm; or black and white transparency over light box, 96.5 x 121.9 cm. Reproduced courtesy of Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects and Tokihiro Sato.

ambivalences bring Sato's camera and creative process directly into the field of representation. Sato's *Photo-respirations* literally breathe light. The luminous agent gives life to these photographs as it is gently inhaled and exhaled with the slow movement of the camera's shutter. The interruption and internalization of the movement of light within the camera not only constitutes Sato's photographs as highly mediated constructions, but emphasizes an embodied and performative (rather than simply a representational) approach to the process of light-writing. This idea of embodiment is very important to Sato. The photographer stresses the corporeal character of perception and writes that the penlight and mirror that he uses to reflect an intense burst of light back to his camera leaves evidence of the movement of his body in the photograph (Sato, 1997: 124). However, these balls and strokes of light also evince the embodied character of photography as a medium. In these works, light does not simply imprint itself onto the sensitive surface but is variously refracted, reflected and manipulated by the photographer, lens, aperture size, exposure time and the darkened chamber of the camera. As the process by which the photograph is produced is written into the surface of the photograph, the terms of photographic representation are radically altered. These photographs are not traces or indexes of objects in space, but must be understood as the products of embodied and temporal events.

Curiously, the artist's presence is erased in this interaction of light and time – Sato is never in any one place long enough to register on the film. In *Photo-respiration # 87 Shibuya* (1990) (see Figure 2), the slow exposure and the dark filter that Sato places over the camera also transform the constant flow of people and traffic that would normally fill this urban space into a mysterious, ethereal mist. *Photo-respiration # 87 Shibuya* (1990), from Sato's 'Tokyo I' series, appeared just as the bubble of Japan's booming 1980s economy was bursting. In response to this economic disaster, Sato turned to sites which embodied the formerly buoyant 'bubble culture' (Fouser, 1999: 47) and used light to invest them with a potent sense of loss. Shibuya, a bustling fashion and entertainment district of Tokyo, is transformed into an eerie ghost town in this photograph. The translucent form of a car is just visible on the left of the image, but the pedestrians who wait to cross the road in the foreground are reduced to a thin layer of vapour. Taken from the square in front of the busy Shibuya station, this photograph is inhabited by numerous absent presences. Japan's economic vitality, the fashionable crowd of young consumers and the artist's own presence within the photograph have all been subsumed by a thin layer of luminous fog and replaced by a series of intangible balls of light. Consequently, light and presence share a confused and highly contingent relationship in these photographs. No longer simply an agent of revelation, in these works light appears to have a presence of its own and quietly conspires with time to obscure the presence of the artist and the inhabitants of the city.

Although it has been suggested that Sato's challenge to the duality of absence and presence draws on a traditional Japanese Buddhist aesthetic (Hammond, 2000: 164–5), I argue that it also has broader implications for the theory of



Figure 2 Tokihiro Sato, *Photo-respiration # 87 Shibuya* (1990). Gelatin-silver print, 41.9 × 58.4 cm; or black and white transparency over light box, 96.5 × 121.9 cm. Reproduced courtesy of Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects and Tokihiro Sato.

photography. The apparent presence of balls of light both in the city space and in the photograph fosters an important set of paradoxes. In one sense, the various flared spots in *Photo-respiration # 87 Shibuya* (1990) mark out the pictorial space and Sato's movement through that field. Light acquires a kind of mass, and generates a certain spatial quality. However, each localized flash of light also eliminates, at that precise point in which it is registered in the photograph, the representation of 'real' space and form and replaces it with an intangible white void. Accordingly, the double meaning of the term 'lumen' resonates with these flares of light. In physics, lumen refers to a unit of light in flux, but in anatomy the word is used to describe bodily cavities and spaces such as blood vessels, glandular orifices or the cytoplasm within cell walls. This double meaning establishes a relation of play between light and space so that light takes on additional connotations as an empty space (Sofoulis, cited

in Vasseleu, 1998: 130). Similarly, the flashes of consuming light that punctuate and bleed into Sato's pictorial space are characterized by an emptiness or luminous absence. As it is shone back towards the camera and refracts and flares off Sato's camera lens, light occupies an intermediary zone between mass and its negation.

Consequently, Sato's *Photo-respirations* must not be read as photographs 'of' blinding or excessive light. Even in its most dazzling extremes light remains inaccessible to vision and can only enter the field of representation in its relation to other objects and discourses. Moreover, such dazzling light, which I liken to the light that issues from the burning mirror, is itself a force of instability that is disavowed in photologies and represents a light so blinding that it cannot be seen. As an elusive and invisible energy, the blinding light of the *miroir ardent* has the ghostly quality of a spirit or *revenant* (Berry, 1994: 243). This ardent radiance is a fiery force that can be represented only metonymically by the ashes or black marks that also mark its absence and extinction. In a similar way, photography can be theorized as the product of an ambivalent yet intangible luminous agent that can only be witnessed in the dark marks that it burns into the sensitive emulsion and the discursive systems which are its only means of entry into the symbolic order. Although light is ever-present as an origin for photography, that origin is endlessly displaced and remains ultimately inaccessible. I have argued previously that in early photographic histories, this inaccessibility is indirectly manifested in the sheer variety of often conflicting metaphors which are invoked in a futile effort to apprehend and fix light as a coherent, knowable and stable foundation for the medium. This formerly veiled process of displacement and deferral is made a prominent feature in Sato's *Photo-respirations*. These photographs chart the constant movement of light as it reflects off Sato's mirror, flares against his camera's lens and leaves its marks in the photographic emulsion only to ultimately escape the photographic representation. By underscoring the process of deferral which carries light to a place beyond reason and sight, Sato's *Photo-respirations* operate as burning mirrors which generate luminous ambivalence in a context where order and stability once reigned.

The work of the contemporary Australian photographer, Danielle Thompson, is marked by another fascinating series of material and discursive interventions in the process of light-writing. Like Sato's work, Thompson's engagement with the ambivalences of light opens photographic practice and criticism to a new range of theoretical possibilities. As an Australian who has spent most of her life on the coast (both in Perth and Melbourne), Thompson is no doubt aware that the sun's life-giving rays can also burn and blister flesh, blind and occasionally kill. Although Thompson currently lives and works in the more subdued climate of Launceston, Tasmania, her early formal training under the glare of the Western Australian sun left its mark on her creative practice. Despite being discouraged by her teachers from photographing during the middle of the day, when the Perth sun was at its most destructive heights, Thompson began to investigate the sun's potential for inducing photographic distortion and abstraction. However, it was not until her 1999 series, *Tears of Ecstasy*, that light's ambivalence was made an

explicit feature of Thompson's work. In *Untitled # 1* (1999) (Figure 3) and *Untitled # 13* (1999) (Figure 4), abstracted marks are created by the dazzling glare of the sun as it flickers and bounces off rolling waters. Often standing in the water where she is buffeted by waves, Thompson and her camera are moved by the force of the sea. This movement of light registers as multiple horizontal white lines against a sea-green ground in *Untitled # 1* (1999), and in *Untitled # 13* (1999) it develops a more fluid, undulating quality that intensifies where the water meets the distant land and explodes into an orange hexagon of lens flare. By pointing her old-fashioned 1957 Rolliflex twin lens camera into this light, Thompson allows its uncontrollable fluidity to flood into her camera's darkened interior and interrupt her finished prints with polymorphous flares and marks. With neither a lens hood nor coated lens, Thompson's camera is not designed to withstand the effects of glare and flare and instead ushers them into her photographs.



Figure 3 Danielle Thompson, *Untitled # 1* (1999). From *Tears of Ecstasy*, lightjet print, 38 × 38 cm. Reproduced courtesy of Stills Gallery in Sydney, Gallery 101 in Melbourne and Danielle Thompson.

The excesses of light are explicitly articulated in terms of their productive relation with both the photographer and her camera in this series. As it plays on the surface of Thompson's watery subject and refracts and flares on her camera's lens, light is made present, paradoxically, as an elusive and perpetually deferred photographic subject. This deferred presence is particularly evident in Thompson's *Untitled # 9* (1999) (Figure 5), from *Tears of Ecstasy*, where a large, incandescent ball seems to emerge from the sand just beyond the reach of the sparkling, incoming sea. The aperture's diaphragm was large when Thompson took this photograph and not only fostered the shallow depth of field in this image, but also allowed the light that refracted off the beach's wet sand to create these unfocused glittering beads. Like the tears that are brought to the eyes when they struggle in vain to see the light, *Untitled # 1*, *Untitled # 13* and *Untitled # 9* are the results of excessive luminous stimulation rather than a direct 'vision' of light. As in Sato's *Photo-respirations*, these photographs demonstrate that even when it is taken to

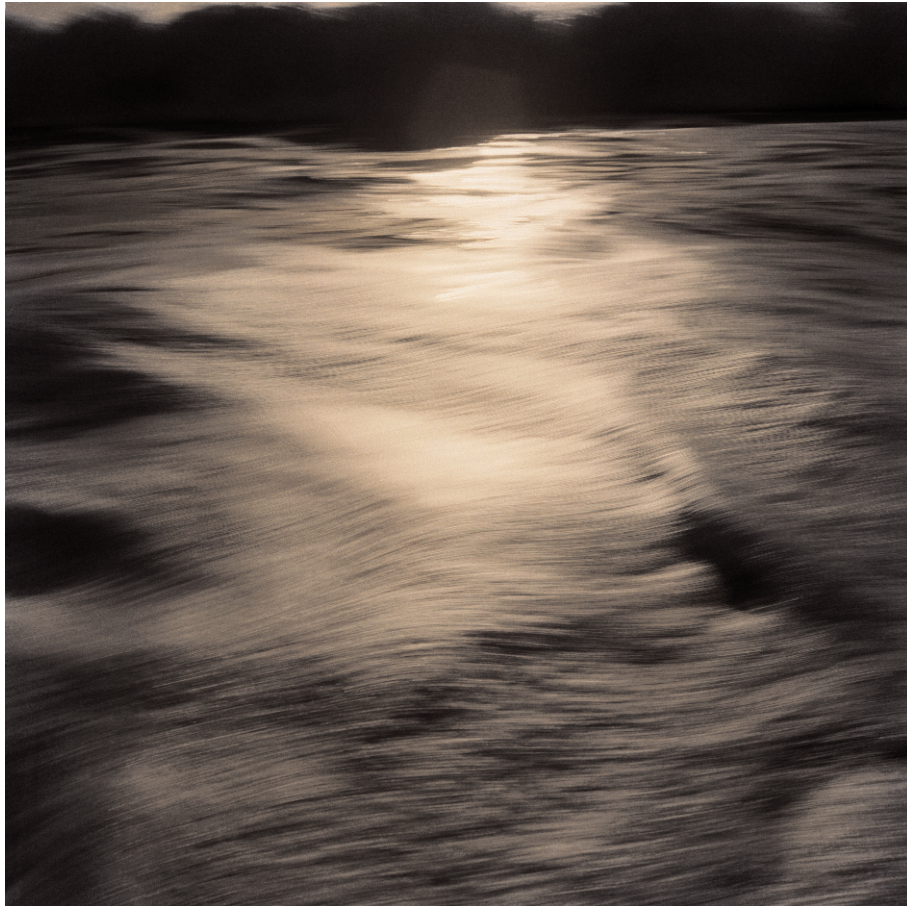


Figure 4 Danielle Thompson, *Untitled # 13* (1999). From *Tears of Ecstasy*, lightjet print, 38 × 38 cm. Reproduced courtesy of Stills Gallery in Sydney, Gallery 101 in Melbourne and Danielle Thompson.

dazzling extremes, light can only enter representation in its tense and highly contingent relations to other objects or discursive formations – in this case to the photographer's manipulation of light levels and exposure times, the jostling watery surface, the camera lens, aperture and the sensitive emulsion that is locked within the camera.

The disruptive glare that imbues Thompson's work also implicates the viewer in this complex, mutually constitutive relationship. The viewer's relation to this dazzling light can be elucidated in an analysis of Thompson's more abstract *Marks of Light* photographs of 2003. In this series of 10 digital colour prints, light is figured as a source of photographic generation and violence. Taken in a dark forest in which splintered light penetrated through the dense foliage above, *Language #2* (2003) (Figure 6), from *Marks of Light*, captures the photographic event rather than a conventional landscape or 'scene'. The eerie blue which characterizes these highly abstracted 'marks



Figure 5 Danielle Thompson, *Untitled # 9* (1999). From *Tears of Ecstasy*, lightjet print, 38 × 38 cm. Reproduced courtesy of Stills Gallery in Sydney, Gallery 101 in Melbourne and Danielle Thompson

of light' is achieved through the use of tungsten balanced film in daylight and a camera exposure suitable for darkness which facilitates over-exposure of the lighter areas. By variously shaking, panning and swirling her camera during the slow exposure, Thompson is able to transform the forest's fractured light into large, flat streaks of white in her finished prints. The resultant luminous stains expel pictorial elements from the photograph and replace them with a disconcerting emptiness. The viewer's expectation that photographic light will conform to the codes and conventions of monocular perspective is thwarted in these works where light fractures and compresses the pictorial depth, denying the viewer a fixed point of reference through which to negotiate the photograph's relationship to its mysterious subject.

The discovery that light does not reveal but distorts and conceals comes as a little shock as we attempt to decipher its marks. Like Roland Barthes's (1981: 26–7) *punctum*, photography's excessive and blinding light is experienced as

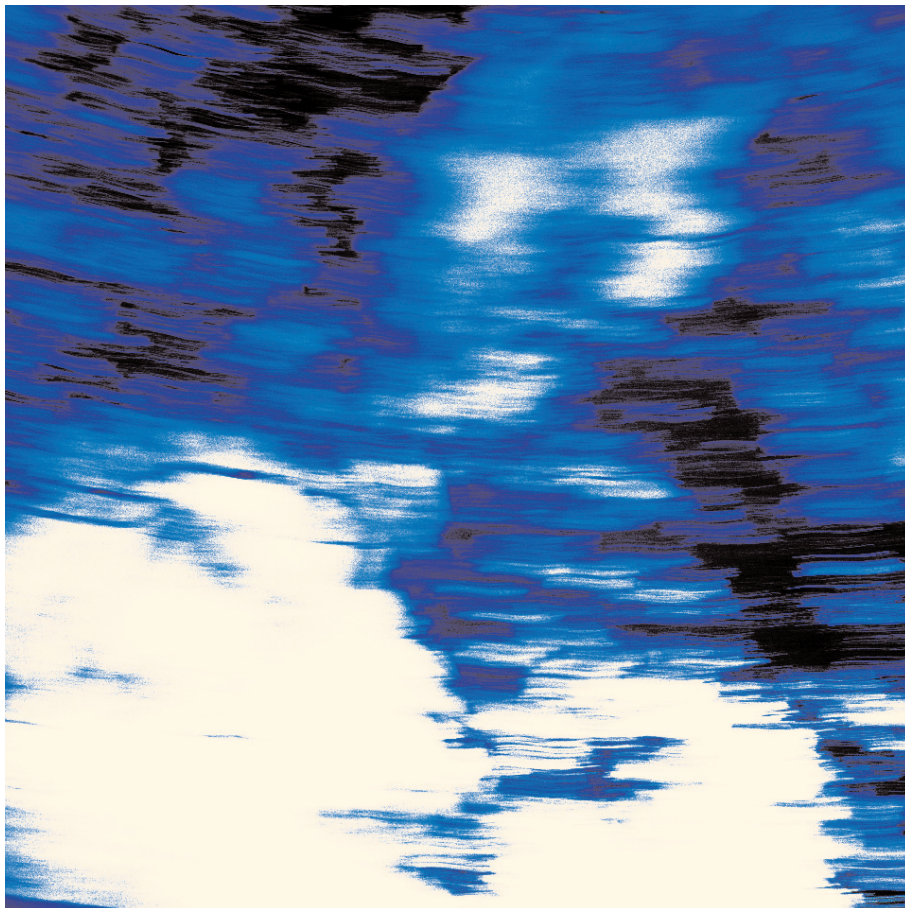


Figure 6 Danielle Thompson, *Language # 2* (2003). From *Marks of Light*, , lightjet print, 115 × 115 cm. Reproduced courtesy of Stills Gallery in Sydney, Gallery 101 in Melbourne and Danielle Thompson.

a disruptive sting or prick. Once it enters into the field of representation it is filtered or subsumed by its codes. Light, revelation, seeing and knowing no longer share a secure and transparent relationship in Thompson's photographs. As it disperses photographic unity and dissolves form into a deep luminiferous pool, Thompson's glare interrupts the photograph's 'reflection' of the 'real' world. Critical here is the philosophical division between light and matter, which allows form to have an absolute presence that is designated as the 'real' in photographic discourse. Light is shed *on* the 'real', from a realm beyond matter, and subsequently absorbed by the photographic emulsion.⁶ As Irigaray's (1974) analysis of Plato's cave and Root's (1864: 56) strategic dissipation of the sun's violent and penetrative glare suggest, these relationships are grounded in the repudiation of the bond between light and embodiment which fosters a series of hierarchized philosophical oppositions between the mind and body and the sensible and intelligible. Similarly, the notion that light is an external force that is shed on matter underpins the status of light as a bridge that connects 'real' objects to the photographic emulsion while miraculously remaining extrinsic to both realms. Upsetting these divisions, the lurid glare that compresses space and undermines the reproduction of monocular perspective in Thompson's five *Language* photographs envelops the viewer in its unsettling light. Instead of opening up the space in the photograph to facilitate an objective experience of seeing and knowing, light is directed back at the viewer and fosters an alternative, highly contingent mode of spectatorship.

Accordingly, in 'The Line and the Light', Jacques Lacan challenges the opposition between the subject and its object that underpins the laws of geometric optics with a point of light that penetrates and engulfs the eye:

Light may travel in a straight line, but it is refracted, diffused, it floods, it fills – the eye is a sort of bowl – it flows over, too, it necessitates around the ocular bowl, a whole series of organs, mechanisms, defences. The iris reacts not only to distance, but also to light, and it has to protect what takes place at the bottom of the bowl, which might, in certain circumstances, be damaged by it. The eyelid too, when confronted with too bright a light, first blinks, that is, it screws itself up in a well-known grimace. (1977: 94)

As it causes blinking, tearing and even pain, this penetrative glare forecloses on a detached and intelligible experience of light, and brings the rationalist debt to matter into play. In a similar way, the excessive light of lens flare floods through the camera's aperture, overwhelms the dark chamber within, bounces off its lens and interior surfaces and leaves a trace of that disruptive movement on the surface of the photograph. The lie that light both bridges and sustains the difference between the 'real', the camera and the photograph is exposed, and light becomes the means by which these formerly distinct terms are brought together. Unable to occupy the position of a knowing, centred subject in front of Thompson's glary landscapes, we too become dazzled by the light.

However, although this recovery of light's formerly disavowed ambivalence may appear to offer a new means of reconciling many of photography's most sustained paradoxes, the practices of lens flare and overexposure must not be seen as innately transgressive gestures. Language and discourse do not simply function to *shield* the fragile tissue of the eye against the violent excesses of light, but can work also to *restore* metaphorically vision that has been subjected to its ardent glare. This process of restoration characterizes the history of the photographic technique that is popularly known as solarization.⁷ Like lens flare, solarization is a process in which an excess of light works to destabilize photographic form and presence. The result of the exposure of a developing photograph to an extra flash of light, solarization produces various abstract effects in the negative which interrupt light's transference of the 'real' onto the photographic emulsion. Paradoxical dark highlights and luminous shadows corrupt solarized photographs and immerse their objects in shifting seas of light and shade, and positive and negative. In her catalogue essays for the surrealist photography exhibition *L'Amour Fou*, Rosalind Krauss famously draws on Derridean theories of spacing and doubling to underscore the discursive ruptures which can be instigated by these 'attacks of solarization' (Krauss in Krauss and Livingstone, 1985: 70). Nonetheless, despite its potential for transgressing and subverting the structure of light-writing as a fetishistic defence against the sun's often violent excesses, solarization is transformed popularly in photographic history into a tool through which the photographer can *master* this very volatility.

Central to this discourse of mastery is the curious repetition of a certain narrative which describes the photographers' accidental discovery and subsequent control of this temperamental technique. The most well-known example of this narrative is Lee Miller's (1975) account of Man Ray's 'discovery' of solarization, which occurred when Miller was frightened by a mouse, turned on a darkroom light and 'accidentally' exposed the developing photographs to an extra dose of non-image-forming light. According to popular myth, the resultant solarized prints became grist for Man Ray's creative mill. In an interview, Miller recollects that 'it was all very well my making the one accidental discovery, but then Man had to set about how to control it and make it come out exactly the way he wanted to each time' (1975: 57).⁸ This discourse of control and mastery is reiterated by Man Ray in his own description of solarization:

You must know when to stop. I used this on some portraits to accent the contours of the face with a black line ... I was trying to master, to dominate, the technical side of photography to explore new areas. (quoted in Jolly, 1997)

A remarkably similar narrative of mastery circulates in accounts of Edmund Teske and Wynn Bullock's experiments with solarization. Although Bullock was aware of Man Ray's work, he claimed authorship over 'the law of light and chemistry that controlled the process' and went as far as spending years trying to secure a legal patent for solarization (quoted in Dille, 1984: 26). An

atmosphere of mystery, magic and forbidden secrets looms over Teske's 'discovery' of solarization during his work with the Federal Art Theatre on the Schifferes-Breton production of *Faust*. Although Maurice Tabard had published his controversial account of Man Ray's process in 1933 and Teske was an avid consumer of international avant-garde periodicals, Teske is said to have 'accidentally discovered' solarization when in 1936 he mistakenly turned on a light in his darkroom before his film was fixed. As in Man Ray's account of the technique, rather than being disheartened by his error, Teske is said to have been inspired and immediately began to experiment with controlled solarization (Cox, 1995; Teske, 1980; Wholden, 1964). This narrative of accidental discovery and subsequent mastery appears yet again in Sandy Walker and Clarence Rainwater's (1974) practical guide to solarization which details the authors' techniques for manipulating and controlling these light leakages to create various aesthetic effects.

Whether or not the remarkable similarity of these accounts is the product of coincidence or art-historical myth, the emphasis that they all place on the photographer's vision functions discursively to foreground the authority of the art photographer as an autonomous creative agent. The popularly-held notion that solarized photographs are the products of a creative vision in contrast to 'straight' records of a scene can be seen as a reaction against conceptions of photography as 'light-writing' and 'sun-painting', which effectively subordinate the role of the photographer as a creative agent to the productive and generative qualities of light, and construct the photographer as a mere operator of a mechanical device – the camera.⁹ Although solarization draws on an excessive and volatile light to undermine the relationship between photography, light, truth and presence, these art-historical discourses function simply to substitute one fetishistic myth of presence for another. The problematized presence of the photographic index is supplanted by the fully resolved presence of the photographer as a creative subject whose authority over the medium serves similarly to disavow those elements of light that will always remain excessive, volatile and unpredictable.

This brief analysis of solarization highlights the importance of theorizing light-writing as a dynamic and productive movement between practice and discourse. As much as the burning mirror can harness light's excesses to challenge photographic history and theory's long-held limits, the intangibility of these invisible luminous excesses also ensures that they remain subject to a certain semiotic malleability long after the photographer triggers the camera's shutter and allows light to work its magic on the sensitive emulsion. The products of the movement of light through time and space, and its productive relation to the photographers, objects, photographic equipment, viewers and discourses which variously interrupt and make that movement manifest, photographs marked by glare, lens flare and solarization, illustrate how this ambivalent light is a force of multiplicity and inclusion. Although this luminous fluidity and contingency is effaced popularly in photographic history and theory so that light can feature as a stable point of origin for the medium, I maintain that its capricious excesses have been implicit in the paradoxes and contradictions which have plagued

photographic discourses since the 19th century. By directing the fiery light that issues from the burning mirror directly onto photography's most sustained myths of presence, I have drawn those excesses to the surface and used them to devise a new and multidimensional means of engaging with light-writing.

Notes

1. Irigaray maintains that this process of reproduction perpetuates a system of resemblance in which dazzling solar light is neutralized by being remade in man's own image. Likening the cave to a womb, Irigaray argues that this maternal origin is effaced in a play of differences which refer only to the masculine. Man is 'taken out of the cave and referred to an *other* origin – the origin of sameness' (1974: 293, original emphasis). Within this matrix of resemblance, the sun replaces the mother as the origin of life and fertility, and a fantasy of masculine autogenesis is established. Therefore, Irigaray's engagement with Plato's cave must not be divorced from her larger interest in the effacement of the feminine within philosophy's androcentric system of equivalence, and the consequent denial of women a place within language to circulate symbolically.
2. See Derrida (1982) for a detailed discussion of the heliotropic character of metaphors of light.
3. Irigaray's *miroir ardent* is described in the English translation of Irigaray's *Speculum* (1974) as a 'burning glass' rather than a burning mirror. These two objects are quite different. The burning glass is a convex lens that concentrates the rays of the sun to produce fire, and the burning mirror collects and focuses solar rays in its concave and reflective surface. As Irigaray describes the *speculum* as a *miroir ardent*, and makes reference to its concave shape and describes its reflective properties, I am identifying what is termed a 'burning glass' in the English translation of her text as a burning mirror.
4. Moreover, by identifying the cave with a womb and its entrance/exit to a vagina, Irigaray is striving to reinvest Plato's simile with a sense of the corporeal, and foreground 'mother-matter' as the founding negation of the logos.
5. Popular discussions of lens flare repeatedly draw on this language of destruction and degradation (see Chapman, 2004).
6. For a discussion of this division between light and matter, as well as a fascinating performative analysis of glare as a disruptive force in painting, see Bolt (2004).
7. Although solarization is the name popularly used to describe the Sabatier effect, the photo-chemist William Jolly (1997) argues that the two terms refer to different processes. However, as my analysis is focusing on the discursive construction of this process, the popular term, solarization, will be used to refer to the Sabatier effect.
8. The valorization of this element of chance makes Miller's story particularly pertinent to surrealist interests.
9. See Green-Lewis (1996). William Henry Fox Talbot contributed to this notion by promoting his new invention as a means of drawing suited to those with limited artistic skill. In 'The Pencil of Nature', Talbot (1992[1844–6]) describes that the impetus for his research into a means of capturing images in a camera obscura came from his frustration at his own lack of artistic skill and his inability to successfully produce sketches with the use of the camera lucida. Similarly, in his 1877 contribution to the English edition of Gaston Tissandier's book, *A History and Handbook of Photography*, Talbot (1992[1878]) promotes his process of photogenic drawing as one well-suited to travelers who are 'ignorant ... of the art of drawing'. This desire to relocate photography from the realm of 'mere

mechanism' to that of art is also closely tied to the denigration of mechanization in the industrial age. For a neo-Marxist account of the displacement of skill in photographic discourses, see Edwards (2002).

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Melissa Miles is a PhD candidate at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia, where she also teaches in visual culture and communications. Currently she is researching the relationship between metaphors of light and photography's epistemology and ontology.

Address: School of English, Communications and Performance Studies, Monash University, Clayton, Victoria 3800, Australia.

[email: melissa.miles@arts.monash.edu.au]