

Luminous shrouds

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I've been asked to compare the lighting of the Coliseum with that of the Eiffel Tower. A rather ambiguous request I think. Architectural lighting must be considered in the context of the object to be lit, and so *what* exactly has to be compared here? The different techniques or lighting systems that have been used? The visual results? The meters of electric cables needed? The answers to these questions would tell surely us that the two monuments, so different from each other, have been lit in different ways. But does it make sense to compare a building like the Coliseum in Rome, which is over 1900 years old, with the Eiffel Tower in Paris, which is "only" 116 years old? It wouldn't seem that it does, however if we consider that they are both very famous and therefore they seem condemned (unfortunately for them) to be lit a few remarks can be made, after all.

Lit to be perceived, in all their dignified grandeur, as intrinsic reflections of the supremacy of the human talent or, more prosaically, as signposts for cultural tourism? Has the lighting of the Coliseum and the Eiffel Tower kept the cloak of respect they deserve for all that they represent, or have they simply been gussied up by having had another personality imposed on them? The architectural lighting of monuments presents a recently created problem, which has its literary equivalent in "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde", noble and respectable by day, quite a different matter by night.

The French have been lighting their monuments for some time. Paris is even called "la ville lumière". In Italy, on the other hand, architectural lighting is so "young" that there isn't even a degree or diploma in lighting design which has legal value and ensures the necessary specific education to practice this profession. Some people believe, and want to make others believe as well, that if you can design a lamp (as some architects can), know what lux and lumen mean (as some engineers do) and know how to use a calculus program (as technicians do) this is enough to make you a lighting designer. I don't think this is so, or better still I know it is not .

I was taught, and I think correctly so, that at night when you wander about in the temporary but ancestrally terrifying condition of blindness, architectural lighting if properly conceived and technically accomplished should lead you to perceive the world which surrounds you as it is and without unneeded and unwanted "extras". If it isn't done this way then we have to talk about show, theatre, or *son et lumière*, and while this is certainly permissible it is not architectural lighting but quite a different thing. To be perceived correctly, in absence of natural light, an object has to be studied thoroughly, recognizing all the elements, colours, forms which can be considered characteristic of it and then, the original image will be given back to us through the use of the right lighting systems and with the help of our titillated sense memories both conscious and unconscious. Quite another thing is the lighting of a sports ground, where lighting has to be "spread" according to technical parameters which are more or less set.

I don't think cities and historical buildings Italian buildings and monuments, in particular have to be improved. It's not necessary. They are the envy of the world as they are now. They simply (?) have to be made visible for what they really represent, using sensitivity and knowledge of architectural lighting. A Roman ruin *cannot* be lit in the same way as a Baroque church. But in Italy, as in the rest of Western world, lighting tends to cover everything with a luminous shroud which in the end, instead of adding value simply trivializes everything. Everybody screams and nobody hears.

On the whole, I think one parameter of comparison between the Coliseum and the Eiffel Tower can be found: the lighting of both monuments, following a common global logic which homogenizes everything, has cancelled their wonderful differences and incredible age-old respectability, to make them similar and even coarse for the mere sake of show. Because of the present lighting these two treasures have assumed the same importance, becoming advertisements for themselves, and moreover are passed off as publicly meritorious jobs by those politicians and not who promoted them.

In conclusion, I wonder if it's really right to think that the Coliseum and the Eiffel Tower and all the rest have to be improved. Maybe it would be enough to perceive them as works of human creativity and use lighting that is studied with more sensitivity and less conceit. I know the answer to the question and it saddens me....

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