Paris by Artificial Starlight:  
How Lighting Systems Ultimately Influenced Parisian Sensibilities  

by Marika Meijer

“Street lighting alone is worth the trip, no matter how far away you live. Everyone must come and see something that neither the Greeks nor Romans ever dreamed of.”  
—Giovanni Paolo Morana

Paris is a city inextricably linked to its aesthetics. Its depiction in films, novels, and travel blogs all evoke the same aura: a magical, glittering nightlife filled to the brim with countless activities. As night falls, Paris comes alive. Its storefronts glow brightly, inviting tourists to step inside and browse their wares, and the Eiffel Tower sparkles every hour on the hour, a scintillating performance designed to showcase the very best of the city. No wonder, then, that Paris has become known as La Ville Lumière, the City of Light. Although it may be hard to imagine it without its nightlife, the fact remains that Paris was once a city just as shadowed and obscure as any other. Only after the revolutionary introduction of street lighting did it begin to accrue its dream-like qualities, evolving into the city as it is perceived today.

This paper seeks to answer the question of how, exactly, the implementation of a public lighting system influenced the way Paris was viewed as a city by both citizens and tourists alike. Did this contribute to the adoption of the nickname La Ville Lumière, and if so, how? It is important to consider the origins of such a “cliché” because, when looked at more closely, it becomes less of a cliché and more of an acknowledgement of how far the city has come since before lighting systems were invented. Paris as the “City of Light” represents more than just a touristy platitude designed to attract attention. It is indicative of the growth and evolution of a city throughout history, and the innovations that were made as it grew into itself. Parisian lighting systems reinvented nightlife, created a more orderly city, and revolutionized the way of life for its inhabitants. Although outwardly this created a sense of awe, amazement, and pride,
the more insidious nature of Paris’ reinvention—what I will refer to as its “darkness”—is revealed through a deeper examination of the forces behind the city’s lighting revolution. While it is true that the lights of Paris were influenced heavily by the French Enlightenment, as evidenced by its name *Le Siècle des Lumières* (literally “Century of Light”), the point of this paper is not to focus on the Enlightenment, but rather to explore the very infrastructure of Paris, and how its organization ultimately defined the way people perceived the city, either positively or negatively. Paris evolved as its lighting system did, both metaphorically and literally—without it, the city we know and love today would have turned out very differently from what it is now.

In the very beginning, during the Middle Ages, when night fell, Paris was cloaked in shadow. There were no communal light sources to guide weary travelers home; instead, thieves lurked in darkened corners and alleyways, waiting to prey on any individual clueless enough to be outside after dark. The only sources of illumination were a sparse handful of faintly flickering candles delineating the city’s limits and its three most symbolic parts of town: the Louvre’s Royal Palace, the *Tour de Nesle* (a watchtower that once stood on the banks of the Seine), and the cemetery of *Saints Innocents*, near *Les Halles* (Downie 191). Paris’ lighting systems remained sporadic and unsystematic for centuries and were largely reliant on citizens’ willingness to cooperate with authoritative ordinances to keep candles burning in windows during holidays or in times of danger (DeJean 133). In 1504, Parliament mandated that candles be lit after 9:00 in any street-facing windows, and in the 1640s a system to keep lanterns lit in public streets and squares during the winter months was attempted but quickly abandoned because no one was willing to stay outside and monitor the status of those lamps in the freezing cold (DeJean 133). Paris needed a systematic method to keep its streets lit at night, but it seemed that none were willing to rise to the occasion. As a result, for much of history the only people out
after dark were thieves, vandals, and the few citizens wealthy enough to possess personal lanterns along with servants to carry them (DeJean 133). Paris turned itself in for the night once the sun went down; to be out alone was to be at the mercy of those who lurked in the shadows.

In March of 1662, King Louis XIV decided to take matters into his own hands by issuing the first patent to a private investor interested in creating a public lighting system, Italian-born Laudati Caraffa. The reasoning, writes Joan DeJean in *How Paris Became Paris: City of Speed and Light*, is that “a city only functions as it should—that is, round the clock—if its streets are lit at night” (132). With the introduction of Caraffa’s idea, the Center for Torch and Lantern Bearers of Paris, came the realization that Paris did not have to be left to thieves or nobles who could afford personal light of their own once light fell. For a small fee (3 sous), torchbearers could light the way for Parisians out late (DeJean 133). One concern for this new service was that some still may not have been able to afford the fee, or at least not on a daily basis. However, Caraffa truly intended for his lantern service to be fully accessible and never ceased to emphasize the fact that, “If you’ll just follow someone who has paid for a torchbearer’s services, your way will be lit for free” (qtd. in DeJean 133). In this way, light was revolutionized, and people slowly began to shift their perceptions of the city as night became less hostile.

In 1665 the chief of police, Gabriel Nicolas de la Reynie, took lantern-bearing one step further by implementing a permanent lighting system throughout the streets of Paris. He had 2,736 lanterns installed across 912 streets, where each street had a light source at each end plus a third in the middle if it was a particularly long boulevard (DeJean 135). At first, these lights were hung in the middle of the street, but as time went on they were moved to a pulley system on the sides of houses in order to make lighting them easier (Downie 192). Since the first version of lanterns consisted only of a simple candle enclosed in glass, although Paris was indeed lit once
night fell, light was only available for as long as the candles burned. They were only lit at the beginning of the night, and so Paris became re-engulfed in shadow around midnight, when the candles blew out and stopped burning (Schivelbusch 63). Thanks to the lack of a self-sustaining light source, Parisians’ newfound freedom still had its limits.

Another limit to night roaming was that in the beginning, around 1667, lanterns were only required to be lit after dark from November 1st to March 1st, and not at all during the summer months (DeJean 136). However, as more and more Parisians grew accustomed to night traveling, the demand for mandated light increased exponentially. Delegations were sent to the crown and the municipality, and a petition was made to increase the length of time from October 15th to March 15th (DeJean 136). This placated the crowds for a little while, but soon they returned to the government to ask yet again for more light, their requests being granted over and over until, by the beginning of the eighteenth century, lanterns stayed lit for nine months out of the year (DeJean 136). As a result of Parisians’ insatiable need to see their city from a different perspective, Paris started to become livable at night. In theory, walking around late was accessible to all, no longer a privilege solely available to those with money. In reality, however, there was a severe disadvantage woven throughout the city’s infrastructure, an inequality that will be discussed later in this paper. For now, as a result of both Caraffa’s innovations and the increase in lighted areas, Parisian nightlife flourished, and with it came a city-wide reevaluation of aesthetics.

In Eric Hazan’s *The Invention of Paris*, light and its aesthetics are spoken of as transformative agents, primarily because of the way that its flame either flickered unsteadily, as a result of uneven candle wicks and oil sputters, or sparkled and glittered when attached to a gas line (Hazan 74). Hazan, along with DeJean and David Downie, reveals a newfound side effect
brought along by such transformative power of city lighting: nightlife. Throughout the centuries, as public lighting became more and more commonplace, the quality of life in Paris began to change. Homeowners interacted more with the city, shops and cafés kept their doors open later, and people became less afraid of shadows (DeJean 135-139). Paris was already buzzing at night by the end of the eighteenth century, but the advent of gas lighting at the beginning of the nineteenth century unmasked an entirely new dimension.

According to Julien Lemer, author of *Paris Au Gaz*, as soon as gas lighting was introduced to Parisian streets at the beginning of the 19th century, night ceased to exist. In fact, he argues, the day actually began the moment the sun set (Lemer 1).¹ When the sun went down, countless lights flickered to life to replace it. People acquired a sense of fearlessness, saying things such as, “We were laughing the entire time, certain that we would never be robbed—all because of new lanterns” (DeJean 139). Storefronts glittered, cafés propped open their doors to set out tables and chairs, monuments glowed, and people ambled about, laughing and conversing amicably. Gas lighting served as a way to “brighten spirits” (Rearick 13). According to Richard Harding Davis, an American reporter, gas lamps existed “not to light some thing or some person, but because they [were] pleasing to look at in themselves” (13). Although street lighting certainly had its practical purpose, the people of Paris loved the way it brought out the softer edges of their city; it made them proud of how far they had come since the Middle Ages and how adored their city was by the rest of the world.

In 1885, a new phenomenon, *L’Éxposition Universelle*, would help to catapult Paris into sudden fame by bringing in tourists from all over the world to look at and admire the city. Designed to showcase Paris to the outside world, the expositions universelles of 1885, 1867, and

¹ This source is only available in French. The paraphrase is from my own translation.
1899/1900 resulted in a massive influx of tourists, most of whom, smitten with the city and its lights, would return to their countries singing praises of the city (Rearick 14-15). According to one such city-goer, “It is difficult to feel gloomy in a city which is so genuinely illuminated that one can sit in the third-story window of a hotel and read a newspaper by the glare of the gas-lamps in the street below” (Rearick 13). Although the first iteration of La Ville Lumière came during the Second Empire, when Jules Michelet referred to Paris as a beacon to the rest of the country,\(^2\) without the tourism and exposure of the expositions universelles, the nickname “City of Light” would never have gained popularity. In 1900, the term Ville Lumière became a widely known tourist expression directly as a result of that year’s Exposition Universelle, which showcased light, electricity, and Paris’ subsequent shift to modernity (Rearick 13). Paris became known as la Ville Lumière because it was at these expositions that, for the first time, the rest of the world could see and experience Paris as its people did: a modern city that was both technologically and creatively advanced. In addition, the expositions allowed Paris to sell itself to outsiders, creating a link between commodity and consumerism that had slowly but surely been developing alongside lighting technology.

Throughout the nineteenth century, Paris had undergone a massive consumer revolution. Although these changes brought about a much-needed reinvention of Parisian social life, they also generated some unintended consequences. To the French, the exposition universelle of 1900 represented the progress, modernization, industrialization, and democratization of French life (Levin 13). It was a marker of how far the city had come since its dark days, and Paris was prouder than ever to market itself to the world. While outwardly the exposition may have served

\(^2\) Michelet called the city “La Lumiére du Monde,” literally “The Light of the World” (Downie 187).
to showcase Paris’ technological prowess, what outsiders didn’t see was the slow but steady sense of alienation and stress settling over the city (Levin 13). Shelley Rice, in *Still Points in a Turning World*, discusses this feeling of isolation in terms of the countless railway systems popping up throughout France, which allowed for greater travel speeds and distances. She writes, “Paradoxically, as geographical distance was bridged by technological advancement, the gaps between people, their social distance, yawned wider than ever before” (Rice 111). Fueled by technology that eliminated the need for human interaction, France—and Paris, by extension—fostered a collective regression of social norms and communications. Miriam Levin, in *When the Eiffel Tower Was New*, calls attention to this feeling when discussing an 1895 lithograph by Hermann-Paul (fig. 1): “In *L’Arrivée*, a disoriented family beginning their summer vacation stands amidst a jumble of suitcases. Isolated in space, they appear confused rather than liberated and secure in the countryside where the train has deposited them” (15). While both Levin and Rice are referring to France as a whole and its varying technological advances (e.g. trains, telegraphs, and electricity), what they have to say can be applied on a narrower scope to Paris and the reinvention of its lighting systems. In other words, this strange new world people lived in isolated Parisians from themselves, each other, and ultimately from the city itself, largely through connections rapidly being cemented between consumerist culture and the effect of street lights on city dwellers.

In the 1880s, Paris had limited electric lighting in its streets, public buildings, and squares (Levin 13). Most notably, however, was the amount of light in cafés, cabarets, and commercial department stores, places arguably designed to showcase and sell Parisian life to interested consumers. The idea of a department store in the nineteenth century was still a very new one, and people were mostly intrigued by the ability to purchase goods from all over the world. What
really helped “sell” the stores, so to speak, were their lighted displays. Lights’ strategic placement served as a beacon to consumers, drawing them to stores like moths to a flame (McMahon 148). A 1902 lithograph by Alexandre Lunois perfectly illustrates this concept (fig. 2). Sketched in color, a continuous stream of women and children can be seen coming in and out of the frame. Miriam Levin describes the environment as one where “Globes of light hang like so many hovering spirits, their light [raking] the figures, making them pale, vaguely ethereal creatures in an artificial space, their relationships to one another pale and superficial” (17).

Department stores and their consumerist culture driven by the advent of electric lighting negatively influenced Paris’ development as a city, argues Levin, turning it into a version of itself fixated solely on profit and commercialism.

As the number of visitors increased, Parisian stores began to cater specifically to tourists, selling postcards and photographs of well-known monuments as souvenirs and allowing people to feel that they owned bits and pieces of the city (Levin 17). By the time the exposition universelle of 1900 came along 20 years later, Paris had become a cliché, a “cluster of technological wonders in an amusement park atmosphere” (Levin 35). The lights and electricity of the 1900 exposition were explicitly consumer-based, emphasizing the magical effects, illusions, and ease of electric lighting. Electricity, in turn, was touted as the energy source of the present and future, its ephemeral, magical quality providing comfort without effort (Levin 36). Although its reputation was based in commercialist philosophy, Paris’ image was nonetheless more romanticized than ever before.

In the 1900s, the streetlights scattered throughout the city allowed for a romanticism previously unavailable in a city wreathed by shadows. Old streetlamps spilled “pools of light” along the Seine, an “otherworldly glow” that served to illuminate the streets and monuments at
night while simultaneously inviting citizens and tourists alike into cafés, libraries, bookstores, and museums with their welcoming flicker (Downie 187). At the turn of the twentieth century, light became a way for Paris to transform itself into a haven for its people, as well as a way to showcase and highlight—literally—the very best it had to offer. City planners not only used light to emphasize small monuments that no one normally took notice of, but also as a preventative measure to discourage vandalism (Downie 192). If something was well-lit, they thought, more people would want to admire it, and so there would be less opportunity for vandals to act. The way lights were staggered along the sidewalk, overlapping with themselves, served as a visual accentuation of the city’s beauty: it lapped at the edges of buildings, threw shadow to create mystique, and danced along the edges of the city’s rooftops. Acting as a “luminous welcome mat,” it gave Paris a human dimension, making the city inviting and safe at night (Downie 192). Because of the way light became so thoroughly incorporated into the cityscape, Downie claims that Paris became a city obsessed with aesthetics, and so to its inhabitants, the visual aspects of light—the way it reflected on sidewalks, the Seine, in storefronts, and on boulevards—meant everything (190).

In addition, thanks to round-the-clock lighting, it was now possible to entertain at night and host outdoor public events in gardens and boulevards, a feat previously unthinkable. In an 1847 lithograph by A. Provost, men and women are seen dancing together at Le Bal Mabille, a public dance event that took place in the middle of the Champs Elysées, along the Allée des Veuves (fig. 3). All around them are gas lamps, glowing softly and creating a convivial ambience perfect for an evening out. Though it may simply be an effect of the way lithographs were printed at the time, the whole image is filled with soft edges and very little shadow, a subtle indication of the artist’s perception of Parisian nightlife. Since gas lamps were all connected to
one system, their light was steadier than the flickering flame of their oil and candle predecessors, allowing for a consistent, gently pulsating glow that captured the hearts of those who bore witness to it, lending a characteristic, dream-like quality to the streets of Paris.

Not all of Paris was smitten, however. For every bit of praise bestowed upon the city, a scathing comment from critics of the so-called “new Paris” followed at its heels. To some, Paris was undergoing a “crude desire to shine, to put on a show, to make life into a theatrical scene” (Rearick 16). They were not entirely wrong. Martin Bressani identifies that citizens of Paris employed many lighting effects that are analogous to those found in a theater. Just as in the theatre, where auditorium lights are customarily dimmed or turned off to place emphasis on the stage, so too did Paris strategically structure its lights in order to better influence how the city was viewed (Bressani 30). Within the theatres, dimming auditorium lights served as a way to create a more genuine experience for audience members. Outside, however, Paris mimicked its theatres, adopting similar lighting practices and further cementing the link between commercialism and the commodity culture associated with new lighting practices. Suddenly all of Paris became a theatre, where at night, streets served as the audience and storefronts were the stage (Bressani 32). While tourists may have continued to enjoy the lights, to its people, Paris was no longer the romantic dream-world it had been. Instead, it had transformed into both a circus and a market stall, a hollow, superficial version of itself meant to dazzle, impress and entice. What had once been a source of pride now caused some Parisians to reject their city and its exhibitions.

To be frank, the advent of street lighting had, from the get-go, had its fair share of issues. According to Darrin M McMahon, in his essay “Illuminating the Enlightenment,” when Louis XIV first introduced the idea of public light, he meant it as a gift from him to his people, a
gesture not entirely sincere in its ambitions. He wanted a visual reminder of his power strewn throughout the city (McMahon 124). Although citizens gladly accepted the freedom that came with lighted streets and bestowed upon Louis XIV the title of Sun King, they were nevertheless all too aware of the crown’s desire for profit. As soon as the king had successfully lit the streets of Paris, he pushed for other French cities to follow suit in order to fully illuminate the country and generate much-needed revenue for an indebted crown (McMahon 129). But light generates shadow, and with it, a sense of foreboding. When his attempt to take over other cities’ lighting systems failed, the king turned to Paris once more, issuing a direct tax on bourgeois houses and an annual imposition of 300,000 livres in order to finance his war fund, an act that generated outrage and dissent from those affected (McMahon 142). While to some, light was ushering in a new era, to those affected most by its subsequent darkness light was symbolic of a political power they neither appreciated nor wanted. They saw right through its dazzling brilliance to the darkness that lay beneath.

Light, from the moment of its introduction to Parisian streets, was first and foremost a power symbol, its distribution strategic. Wealthier areas were lit first, emphasizing class differences between neighborhoods and drawing clear boundaries between what was deemed “savory Paris and unsavory Paris (McMahon 147). Upscale streets had so many lights that, at night, “people seemed to live a perpetual celebration as if transported into a fictional city”, while impoverished areas remained trapped in darkness, still reliant on candles (Bressani 30). As lighting technology evolved and lamps became more powerful, the number of them actually decreased so that there was always the same amount of light (Shivelbusch 64). This in turn made

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3 This imposition, called les rachats, was increased to 5,400,000 livres two years later, and served as a mandatory means to finance the Crown’s fiscal issues left over from the Seven Years’ War (McMahon 142).
lighted streets less of a practicality and more of a symbol of authoritative power. Had the city wanted its lights to be useful, it would have increased rather than decreased the number of streetlamps so as to provide more thorough coverage. Coincidentally, because of their perceived symbolism, they were a perfect medium for expressing discontent with the sovereignty (Schivelbusch 65). To Parisians, lanterns represented everything they hated about power and control, and their light begged to be extinguished. Through the action of smashing lanterns, the city banded together as it rioted against the undue power of the government, and light grew to be symbolic of law and order as the areas controlled by rebels were cloaked in shadow while police roamed well-lit streets (Schivelbusch 65). However, once gas lighting came into effect and lighting systems necessitated fewer and fewer steps, the cathartic action of smashing a single lamp became useless, for the lights would stay on so long as their power source remained intact (Schivelbusch 70).

Superficially, the introduction of gas lighting in the 1800s was a gleaming beacon of progress. Below the surface level, however, it was not an entirely seamless process. Parisians up until this point were accustomed to a certain type of lighting, and so when it was swapped for something new, public concern for safety ran high. Jean-Baptiste Fressoz writes of a sudden, widespread insecurity of light failure. Gas lighting meant that systems currently in place lost their autonomy, instead becoming linked to a single switch in a single power plant (Fressoz 732). This forced a sort of dependency upon the general population, a dependency that unsettled those who had grown accustomed to autonomy. Factories tried to counteract this by releasing advertisements designed to appeal to male sensibilities, drawing emphasis to the ease with which
they could now control their households, but in the end the people were still unsure (Fressoz 732). In addition, notes Fressoz, Parisians disliked “the ugliness of an industrial light,” which, in their eyes, negated the romantic flicker and sputter of oil lamps (the same was soon to be said about the transition to electricity several decades later) (732). These new gas lights were harsh on the eye, and, to top it all off, risked explosion (Fressoz 732). While Parisians eventually came to love the aesthetic of gas lighting, at first it was a shift wildly mistrusted by most, for behind its prettiness lay a dangerous explosive potential in addition to a forced sense of dependency in a previously autonomous society.

At the same time as gas lighting was popularized in Paris, the city was undergoing massive renovation efforts at the hands of Georges-Eugene Haussmann, whose vision of Paris was for it to become a modern, streamlined, visually pleasing hub of activity. According to Vanessa Schwartz, as Haussmann’s renovations cleared the city, its sightlines were prioritized, and “Visualizing the city became synonymous with knowing it” (qtd. in Phillips 74). In other words, Paris’ image was solidified solely on the basis of first impressions, facilitating the notion that one had only to experience the city superficially to claim to “know” it. Phillips argues that Paris was a city best assessed in terms of its aesthetics: the way light was emphasized in shop displays and souvenir postcards, for example, helped outsiders imagine the city’s magic and how they might experience it for themselves (75). Phillips also brings up the idea of there being two sides to Paris: light does not exist without darkness, and darkness cannot exist without light. In this way, both a “light” and “dark” Paris must exist, as two sides of the same coin. As seen

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4 In figure 4, a lithograph by Aloïs Senefelder demonstrates this concept by showing a man leaping out of bed while simultaneously lighting a gas lamp, gun in hand, to protect his home from invaders. Gas lighting could be turned on much more swiftly than previous lighting methods, which allowed this head of house to defend his wife much more easily thanks to the presence of a single switch as opposed to a candle and matchsticks (Fressoz 734).
previously, with the deliberate distribution of light alongside a growing sense of unease associated with Paris’ darkened areas, where one flourishes, so too does the other. To Phillips, there is a clear difference between the idea of Paris and the actual city. “Light” Paris, he claims, is the ideal Paris, often more expectation than reality (95). “Dark” Paris, on the other hand, is the side of the city that people see but choose not to acknowledge: the lower-class neighborhoods and the city’s rather tumultuous past (Phillips 74).

For some, hiding this “dark” Paris was a matter of utmost importance. Haussman’s renovations, along with the strategic lighting of select areas, erased the poor and the “unsavories” from city life (Jordan 100). Throughout the Second Empire, from 1853 to 1870, Baron Haussmann’s ultimate goal was to take back central Paris from the lower classes by manipulating urban spaces in order to “impose order on his surroundings” (Jordan 99). Haussmann believed that if one controlled a city’s center, one controlled the entire city, and at the time, L’Ile de la Cité was overrun and overpopulated by the poor. Haussmann, through his streamlined boulevards and open squares, essentially forced inhabitants out of the center of the city, to be replaced by those who could afford his new housing prices (Jordan 100). The Baron, writes Jordan, “proudly declares in his Memoires . . . that in ‘less than five years, from 1855 to 1859’ he accomplished the ‘gutting’ (éventrement) of old central Paris, ‘the neighborhood of uprisings and barricades’” (100). While these renovations did improve the city’s aesthetics and declutter its streets, they were highly controversial and unappreciated by those affected most. The so-called “dangerous classes” were insulted and unamused, but because of their status there was very little they could do stop Haussmann’s frenetic rearrangements of the city. As a result, the poor were essentially erased from city life and stripped of their voice, forced into the outskirts of the city.
and away from the action, hidden in plain sight behind beautiful buildings. No one thought to look twice, a fact that Richard Harding Davis emphasizes heavily in his essays.

In *The Showplaces of Paris*, criminality is spoken of in the sense that it is essentially hidden in plain sight, deep within the neighborhoods of the bourgeoisie. The most heinous crime and the most desperate poverty were found in neighborhoods “notorious chiefly for their wickedness, and yet which were in appearance . . . well-ordered and commonplace-looking” (Davis 176). Because of Haussmann’s strategic renovations, the ugliness of the city, along with its poor, were concealed behind beautiful building exteriors. In some cases, however, crime and criminals were put on display, acting as tourist attractions of their own. People payed to see and experience Parisian criminality, profiting off of individuals’ lifestyle, and it was city officials themselves who gave the “tours” (Davis 178). The poor, according to Davis, were “as ready to do their part of the entertainment as the actors of the theatre are ready to go on when the curtain rises” (177). Paris continued to sell itself to the masses, all the while hiding its unpleasantness behind well-placed, strategic performances and showcases.

The fact that authorities, in addition to the general population, believed that parts of the city should be hidden was not a new concept. However, it still represented the disconnect between what Parisians wanted people to see and what was actually seen when you dug a little deeper. Gas lighting, alongside Haussmann’s renovations, served as a means of reconfiguring the city’s geography, effectively splitting it into light and dark. Light was clearly a privilege not all could afford, a notion further made obvious by the lack of continuity from one space to the next. Gas lamps were hung in communal living areas, but in individual rooms candles still flickered (Bressani 30-31). While Haussmann and authority figures may have sought to hide the so-called “shameful” parts of Paris by blanketing them in darkness, Bressani argues in his essay that these
dark zones only served to highlight what already existed, giving Paris an added dimension that would not be available otherwise. Nobody may have wanted to believe that a “dark” Paris existed, but in reality it thrived, with a depth and character very much its own. The truth is, without the city’s shadows, no one would have noticed how much Paris had grown.

As with every major city, Paris’ history is neither linear nor clear-cut. While its lighting systems did help lead it to fame, they also highlighted stark discrepancies between the ideal and reality. As such, both a “light” and “dark” Paris existed, each useful in its own ways. Shadows added dimension to the light, and, while the light may have wanted to drive away the darkness, it ultimately brought night to the surface, creating a dream world that enraptured both citizens and visitors alike. Paris’ lighting systems gave it the nickname *La Ville Lumière*, contributing to its developing personality and further engendering a sense of mystique and community within the city itself. As Paris grew, so too did its people’s belief in their city. They wanted to show it off to the world, to demonstrate their technological prowess and modernity, which gave Paris the exposure it needed in order to catapult itself onto the world’s stage and truly become the version of itself we know and love today. Without its artificial stars, Paris would have remained cloaked in shadow.

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Figure 1 – Hermann-Paul, *L’Arrivée*, 1895


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Figure 2 – Alexandre Lunois, *Le Bon Marché*, 1902

A. Provost. *Le Bal Mabille*. 1847, Les Musées de la Ville de Paris, Paris. Image available at [https://art.famsf.org/alexandre-e%C3%A9%C3%A8ste-gabriel-provost-pr%C3%A9vost/paris-pittoresque-le-bal-mabille-19633018582](https://art.famsf.org/alexandre-e%C3%A9%C3%A8ste-gabriel-provost-pr%C3%A9vost/paris-pittoresque-le-bal-mabille-19633018582)

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Figure 3 – A. Provost, *Le Bal Mabille*


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Figure 4 – Aloïs Senefelder, lithograph
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