OUTSIDE KNOWING:
Accessing Alterity in the
Nocturnal Urban Landscape
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Abstract: Michel Foucault qualified the writing of Maurice Blanchot as ‘thought from the outside’. The reference is to absence or, the ability of what we cannot know to shed light on what we seek. In the context of the present-day, European city, connections to existing cultural frameworks make it difficult to identify agents and processes of change. And yet, these same ‘blind spots’ hold the potential to generate new knowledge. The current paper searches for the unknown in the semi-obscurity of the urban night. This does not imply that nocturnal landscapes are absent, on the contrary, they are territories of distinct appropriations, contestation and reflective agency. Rather, the nightscape offers an alternate regard on the diurnal city, a view that in darkness, requires even greater focus. Exploring Blanchot’s concept of the ‘other’ night as defined in “Le Dehors, La Nuit,” from L’Espace Littéraire (1955), provides a means of elucidating limits of alterity within nocturnal darkness. And yet, in search of an actionable alterity, the current research asks if there is not a third, ‘anticipatory’ night, one that situates itself between what Blanchot calls the ‘first’, or knowable night, the realm of sleep and everyday(night) life, and the unattainability of the ‘other.’ It is in this night that moments of possibility are accessed and articulated.

Relevance comes as European cities grow darker to reduce energy consumption and light pollution. At the same time, greater populations are investing the night, imposing questions of how the night city is appropriated, where actions may take place and who may participate in these actions. This proposal fits within a larger, interdisciplinary doctoral research project: “Utopian Nights, Navigating No Place in Nocturnal Urban Landscapes.” A project which, through the practice of nightwalking, seeks to generate possibility within specific atmospheres of the nocturnal European city.

Keywords: Blanchot, night, urban space, walking

INTRODUCTION

If night continues to be bound by day, its borders are increasingly contested, caught between the incursions of diurnal economies and often irreversible costs of over-illumination. The environmental impacts of artificial lighting on human well-being, on the preservation of ecosystems and the depletion of natural resources are well-established. Reducing these impacts involves changing the conversation from a focus on “cities of light” to a more balanced and technologically intelligent focus on sustainable, nuanced cities. This conversation is ongoing in Paris, France, where much of my research is based and where public lighting contracts (including street lighting) are set to expire in 2021. Asking how pedestrians will interpret alternate shadings of their city has become essential.

Closely linked to a near 24-hour illumination is the desynchronization of everyday life, driven by the incessant activity of global economies. In France alone, over 15% of employees work regularly or periodically between the hours of midnight and 5 am.\(^1\) As circadian cycles become increasingly dependent on “the dominant, artificially stretched ‘day’” (Dimmer, Solomon and Morris 2017, 31), the identity and cultural functions of the night come into question. Issues of nocturnal experience, accessibility and possibility in the context of urban space and its appropriations have incited a growing volume of research. The concerns are multidisciplinary, encompassing the fields of environmental design, geography, sociology and urbanism. They underscore the necessity of studying the urban night in order to mediate the increasing segmentation between the city that rests, plays, works and wanders. As geographer Luc Gwiazdzinski—a contributor to the City of Paris’ 2010 report on the state of the capital’s nights\(^2\)—points out, the interest from researchers and government authorities to open discussions around the attributes, and indeed the protection of the urban night, reflects a need to come to terms with multiple space-times; to develop the night without creating new conflicts and, to invest in the night, “while conserving some of its mystery” (Gwiazdzinski 2015, 10).

In this paper, I explore the potential of nocturnal spatial practice, and specifically nightwalking to generate possibility in the appropriation and experience of urban space. In allowing for an altered perception of the city, the night operates as both a critique of diurnal imperatives and a resource for divergent practice.
Those who do not sleep, who step outside, into the night, either by choice or necessity, make present the shifting boundaries and illuminated archipelagos of a distinctly nocturnal landscape. Navigating along lines of reflective agency and control agendas, the nightwalker expands our knowledge of the urban and moves this new-found insight forward. I look to examples from artists engaged with the urban night, as well as to my own nightwalking experiences, to explore strategies for accessing an actionable alterity. One means of access is found in the approach to the “other” night, as defined by Maurice Blanchot (1982). The project allows a connection to be drawn between the articulation of alterity and the position of “no place” in the nocturnal landscape. No place, understood in the Lefebvrian sense as a non-potentialized place (Lefebvre 1991), is interpreted as the generative site of the “good place,” its counterpart in the utopian metaphor. The nightwalker moves beyond diurnal blind spots to perceive what has, as yet, been too “bright” to be imagined.

In the course of this research project, night walks have been largely practiced in and around Paris. Alternate routes have explored urban centers in The Republic of Ireland, England and The Netherlands, while additional dark sky explorations have led to Svalbard and Southern Texas. They have been practiced in solitude but also in the framework of organized municipal and cultural events (in London and Paris) designed to open the night to a larger population, while tempering apprehensions of darkness.

1. DIVERGENCE IN A DARK NIGHT

1.1. TOWARDS A NEW DARKNESS

Darkness is not essentially neutral, positive, or negative; its power depends on the temporal and spatial contexts in which it is experienced. (Edensor 2017, 179)

Darkness, and the atmospheres it evokes, are determining factors in how social space is navigated at night. Darkness provides not only the background against which “action takes place”—it has the agency to alter this action altogether” (Wilkinson 2018, 126). Understanding the character of contemporary darkness becomes all the more critical as European cities, including Paris and London, legislate to reduce nocturnal illumination. Alongside the well-documented concerns of light pollution, paired with efforts to reduce energy consumption and thus, global warming, is the question of how pedestrians will adapt to darker urban nights. How, can negative conceptions of darkness (insecurity, promiscuity, obscurity) be supplemented by positive qualities, such as intimacy, conviviality (Edensor 2015, 422) and, the more aesthetic or atmospheric character of shadows? And how, can a more “judicious” (Edensor 2017, xiv) approach to artificial lighting take into account the ecological, cultural, spatial, and temporal needs of specific localities?

In his cultural history, Nights in the Big City: Paris, Berlin, London, 1840-1930, Joachim Schlör outlines the struggle between darkness and light to define the “true ‘nature’ of the nocturnal city” (1998, 80). It was a struggle in which darkness would eventually lose out to metaphors of: “light and progress, light and modernity, light and the metropolis” (Schlör 1998, 80). However, as culturally engrained as these metaphors have become—and one can include associations of light and security—darkness was never fully conquered. The semi-darkness that characterizes the contemporary urban night continues to condition our perception of light, particularly the reading of exterior architectural lighting and signage. At the same time, shadow is made visible by light. The relationship of illumination and darkness is not binary but interdependent and perpetually fluid (Edensor 2017; Morris 2011). What is referred to throughout this paper as urban darkness, is in fact a modulation of darkness in light – light from the moon, from buildings, streetlamps, vehicles, and infrastructure, all contributing to the diverse nocturnal atmospheres of the city.
The temptation when discussing experiential and qualitative atmospheres of night is to sentimentalize a time-space where freedom, romance and subversion are readily accessible. This is part of the mythology of the urban night, the night of cinema, detective mysteries and revolution. The reality is that from darkness to seduction, these qualities are always articulated around the incessant activities of consumption, industry, mobility, tourism and urban renewal (Eldridge and Nofre 2018, 3). Certainly, there are instances where the qualitative and the consumable overlap. Images of romantic night-time vistas serve to promote tourism, just as the subversive freedom of underground art and music venues can trigger neighborhood regeneration. Throughout the urban night, the interplay of control agendas and human agency is ever-present. The nightwalker has the ability to traverse, or not, zones of simultaneity and discontinuity, both acting on and being acted upon by the nocturnal city.

Nightwalking does not require an act of transgression, as discussed in Michel de Certeau’s “Walking in the City” from The Practice of Everyday Life (1988). Possibility can be found along known and accessible streets; streets already transformed by partial darkness and differentiated uses. Of course, De Certeau is operating on a largely diurnal and static city (Morris 2009, 692). While recognizing the existence of innumerable, overlapping paths, there is little push-back to acts of resistance. And there is no apparent differentiation in the wants, needs and identity of his walker (figure 3). In Exploring Nightlife (2018), Adam Eldridge and Jordi Nofre reference contemporary, global cities, to present a far greater diversity of nocturnal appropriations.

Class, race, gender, sexuality, disability, religion and age all impact on the ways that we experience the night, if indeed we have access to it at all. To speak of the night only in terms of transgression or fun obscures fundamental questions about for whom it offers such promise and upon whose labour this trope is dependent. (Eldridge and Nofre 2018, 10)

What is perceived as a multiplicity of night spaces is the direct reflection of multiple cultures, identities and patterns of use. In terms of spatial practice, the walker traverses not one night, but many nights, often simultaneously.

1.2. NIGHTWALKING AS RECLAMATION AND APPROPRIATION

Nightwalking is a form of “stretched-out, mobile belonging” (Edensor 2010, 706). As a methodology it allows for a close and tangible enacting on, and by, the city. The act of passing by is never passive, nor is the role of the nightwalker only to observe. From its etymological roots, “nightwalking is ‘extravagant,’ meaning that it involves wandering beyond bounds, both geographical and social” (Beaumont 2015, 8). The nightwalker has the ability to uncover “practices of urbanism that are not neatly folded into more forceful
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stories” (Rossiter and Gibson, 2011), including those of the night-time economy, urban development and consumerism.

The emergent history of the nightwalker parallels the development of street lighting and subsequent “nocturnalization” (Koslofsky 2011, 2) of the city. From the mid-eighteenth century when Nicolas Rétif de La Bretonne, the self-proclaimed Hibou-Spectateur, chronicled the Paris night, to the restless houselessness of Charles Dickens in his London “Night Walks” (1860); to the Surrealist nights of Louis Aragon in Le Paysan de Paris (1926), and the auto-reflection of Roland Barthes in “Soirées de Paris” (1979), nightwalking narratives have filled the need to “reclaim, redeem and transform” (Beaumont 2015, 11) the city as one’s own. In the current era of 24-hour availability, it is not just the city being reclaimed, but the right to sleep, to rest and to truly go dark.

As Simone Delattre explains, the nightwalker is continually caught in the contradiction of being both “solitary sovereign”, unique creator and embodiment of a self-guided city, and “blind subject,” operating in co-presence with political and economic agendas. There is always the desire to, on one hand, understand the night, and on the other, to be submerged by the “intoxication of the labyrinth” (Delattre 2003, 113). It is this contradiction that attracts artist and narrator to wander the urban night. Night becomes a “trope for the unthought and the unthinkable” (Bronfen 2013, 19), an opportunity to be both in the city and removed from its obligations and expectations.

2. NOCTURNAL POSSIBILITY

2.1. BLANCHOT AND THE OTHER NIGHT

In “The Outside, The Night,” from The Space of Literature, Maurice Blanchot introduces his concept of the “first night” (première nuit) and more elusive “other night” (l’autre nuit). Reflecting on the writing of nocturnal darkness, he presents a means of thinking about the night as both true and impenetrable. Writing in the 1950s, Blanchot observes the increasing dissolution of nocturnal elements into the “empire” of the day and the “withdrawal” of night into light (Blanchot 1982, 167). This night is the first night. It is the night that follows the accepted circadian rhythms of sleep and repose. It is the night of darkness, “when everything has disappeared” (Blanchot 1982, 163) and yet, it is a welcoming night, a night we can enter into, lay down in, a night that embraces death.

The “other” night eludes appropriation. It is an abstract night, encountered when what we believed to have disappeared, reappears with new intensity or in another form. Here the invisible is what one cannot cease to see; it is the incessant making itself seen (Blanchot 1982, 163). The attraction of the other is the acknowledgement of what Michel Foucault, writing on Blanchot, termed “thought from the outside” (Foucault 1987, 16) or, a chance to view the night as it truly is. But you cannot search methodically. The night attracts by “negligence” (Blanchot 1982, 170). Louis Aragon applies a similar strategy in his Paris night walks, believing in the inherent possibility of error as well as the ability, with “each step” (Aragon 1994, 10), to invent new realities, new modern myths. On one such night walk, in Paris’ Parc des Buttes Chaumont, Aragon experiences a frisson, or shiver of expectation, as boundaries dissolve to provide a glimpse of the “other” (Asholt 2009, 165). I have taken this same walk (figure 4). Not in pilgrimage–Aragon’s experience cannot be repeated—but for what today is a rare opportunity to visit a Parisian park after dark. And, to see who else on a damp Wednesday night has had the same idea. Amongst manmade hills and paths that end in darkness, I could almost believe the illusion of being in nature, of being outside the city.

For Blanchot, the approach of the other is the approach of impossibility. It is the same impossibility encountered in the act of writing, and by extension, the creative work (l’oeuvre). This experience of impossibility “is purely nocturnal, it is the very experience of night” (Blanchot 1982, 163).
2.2. Generating Alterity

Between restful nights and unfathomable darkness, there remains a terrain of practice in which the nightwalker can not only attempt to approach the "other," but can gain some portion of actionable, outside knowledge. In this, anticipatory time-space, outside knowledge is understood as an opening of critical perspective. With each step, this knowledge is being sketched and schematized (Marin 1984, 10) in preparation of a divergent future. To draw a further parallel with utopian thinking, the nightwalker accepts that "different ways of organizing urban life and space are imaginable and potentially realizable" (Pinder 2015, 30). The traversing of nocturnal space and the potential encounter with no place, not as a void or meaningless place but as a generative site of possibility, requires a mode of walking that is essentially anticipatory. In other words, one that allows for the "contingency of the possible" (Pinder 2015, 31), in order to capture and accept potential.

In his chapter "Night-walking," Schlör reinforces the idea of anticipation. Reflecting on the many "pedestrian investigators" writing the modern nocturnal city, he suggests that if aspects of the urban night "evade the penetrating gaze of systematic research," (Schlör 1998, 269), their eventual, if momentary, unveiling is not accidental. Rather, the nightwalker passes by "in the certain knowledge that the accident will happen" (Schlör 1998, 269). The different identities of the nightwalker and subsequent "ways of walking," (Schlör 1998, 269), enriches this theory. Each augments our knowledge of the city, and most importantly, sets "this knowledge in movement" (Schlör 1998, 269). Schlör's thinking recalls Lefebvre's concept of "moments," synthesized by David Harvey in his Afterword to The Production of Space:

The 'moment' which he interpreted as fleeting but decisive sensations (of delight, surrender, disgust, surprise, horror, or outrage) which were somehow revelatory of the totality of possibilities contained in daily existence. Such movements were ephemeral and would pass instantaneously into oblivion, but during their passage all manner of possibilities – often decisive and sometimes revolutionary – stood to be both uncovered and achieved. (Harvey 1991, 429)

For Lefebvre, multiple practices within the urban are "full to overflowing with alternative possibility" (Harvey 2013, xvii). "Moments" were seen as instances of rupture, experienced outside of habitual routines and capable of opening a brief view to a transformed world (Pinder 2015, 36). The achievability of the moment, its need to be acted upon, is what enables the generation of possibility. How this generative action can take form, in narrative, in artistic intervention, and integrated within urban practice, is central to the nightwalking project.

2.3. Practicing Temporal Divergence

In her series, What Is the Shape of This Question? (1999), Louise Bourgeois asks: "Has the day invaded the night or has the night invaded the day?" Bourgeois, who suffered from insomnia throughout her life, addresses the blurred boundaries of chronological, social, and lived time. The problematic she poses is whether the night is shrinking, encroached upon by diurnal enterprise, or expanding with the endless potential of more time to "do". Sleep is no longer essential to the equation. More often, in these times of continual connectivity, sleep is an act of resistance. It is why, in his book 24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep, Jonathan Crary, referencing the work of Emmanuel Levinas, distinguishes between insomnia, the watchful vigilance of those too attentive to turn away from the day's realities, and the imposed sleeplessness of round-the-clock production (Crary 2014, 18-19).

Open in October 2019, a multidisciplinary exhibition entitled "24/7", and directly inspired by Crary's writing, opened at Somerset House in London. Artists portray a world where a "premium is placed on activity" (Crary 2014, 15). What remains of "alternate temporalities" (Crary 2014, 19), where it is still possible to live off-the-clock, is investigated by artist and researcher Helga Schmid. Schmid staged 24 Hours in Uchronia, inviting participants to enter a temporal utopia, removed from traditional time and social structures for one full "night". Once outside of Uchronia and back on the London streets, however, social time retakes control. While temporary, this event along with artist-led night walks, allowed a wider public to think differently about the night. It was also safe, perhaps the primary factor in encouraging, if only occasionally, the public to inhabit the urban night. As I noted at another nocturnal event, a night run organized by the City of Paris, while the elation of traversing the capital, of absorbing the energy of a Saturday night with runners of all ages, speaking multiple languages, stayed with me well after my 3am finish, my mobility was not "normal". Nor was the route, which included access to various monuments, repeatable. However, if I was abdicating much of my personal narrative of the night to the event agenda, I could still pause to witness the palpable emptiness of business districts; and the conversion, even in October, of parks and river quays into extended living rooms. My perception, conditioned by "ingrained, seemingly natural predispositions towards the urban surroundings" (Dunn 2016, 9), began to shift. No longer drawn to the same landmarks as in the day, the backdrop of architecture was made innocuous by the glare of sodium lamps or inversely, gained density in shadow (figure 5). The finish line crossed, I was again left to my solidarity wanderings, to find a way home and see the day rise.
2.4. CONTROL AGENDAS AND MEDIATING CIRCUMSTANCES

It has been argued, notably by Robert Williams, that when city authorities sanction cultural appropriations such as light festivals and night markets, they can be seen as exercising a form of counter-agenda designed to reterritorialize (Williams 2008, 516), or take back a night that has escaped control. Certainly, strategies of control exist in many forms. Williams cites the mechanisms of video surveillance (Williams 2008, 518) and the use of electric lighting to “channel” the public along preferred routes (Williams 2008, 522). In parallel, tactics of prohibition, or what Henri Lefebvre calls ‘negative appropriation’ (Lefebvre 1991, 319), are used to make spaces inaccessible to different segments of the population. Physical barriers are erected to signify ownership and thus exclusion. More subtle tactics divide the population by zone (work, entertainment, sleep). Even zones accorded to “the body, sex and pleasure” (Lefebvre 1991, 320) are well defined. Their supposed freedoms only “profitable pseudo-transgressions” (Lefebvre 1991, 320), regulated to designated nightlife districts.

The freedom of individuals to roam the night, to seek out darkness and exercise “reflective agency” (Williams 2008, 520) is interpreted by Williams as a form of deterritorialization—the counter-use of hegemonic space. In a time when cities are growing darker, where individuals are on the street for other reasons than resistance (work, migration, homelessness), the more pertinent question is how to mediate multiple agendas. Ultimately for Williams, it is the overlapping and often contradictory modes of nocturnal practice that generate what we understand as urban night space (Williams 2008, 526). The perspective of a mediated and contested night space is further elucidated by nightwalking. Traversing a city allows a cross-section of overlapping “nights” and points of contact to be discerned, but not without exposing spatial practice to the influence of darkness and temporal shifts (early evening, deep night, predawn). And it is this ongoing interplay, enacted on and embedded with the distinct built environment of the city, that constructs “assembled” (Shaw 2018, 75) atmospheres of urban nocturnal time-space.

3. NIGHT AS NOT-YET AWAKENED

Throughout this paper, the operation of nightwalking has been presented as a means to engender possibility in the alterity of the urban nightscape. As practice, it ventures on a path towards what Ernst Bloch, in *The Principal of Hope* (1986), located in the “Not-Yet-Become” (Bloch 1986, 6). This nearby potential “exists and is in motion” (Bloch 1986, 4). The Not-Yet-Become night diverges from the present night in that, like hope, it still has to be learned (Bloch 1986, 3). Therefore, the eventuality of the nightwalker’s arrival becomes just as important as the final destination. Knowledge comes by entering the night and is embodied in the diverse rhythms and modes of walking.

While the “other” night entrances the nightwalker to go beyond the possible, the true potential of the urban night is its nearness. The night is different from the day in terms of social practice, density, visibility and referential perceptions of identity and culture, but it also is able to reflect on the diurnal city. As Gwiazdzinski concludes:

Night brings us back to the essential dimensions of the city and of life: humanity and emotion . . .. It is a space-time that allows us to identify the weak signals, the emerging initiatives and indicators of the future-possible city. (Gwiazdzinski 2010, 98)

Studying the urban night adds to an essential comprehension of how cities function including, how they will adapt to greater darkness and larger active nocturnal populations. It is an opportunity to reevaluate the city and its architecture, asking questions of what is a building in darkness, a public square or park? Finally, night provides the possibility of generating as yet unknown solutions.
ENDNOTES


4 In France, a 2013 regulation requires commercial and public buildings to turn off interior lights one hour after the last employee has left the building. Exterior illuminated signage is to be turned off from 1am to 6am. See https://www.service-public.fr/professionnels-entreprises/vosdroits/F24396. Also see 2018 City of London Lighting Strategy: https://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/services/environment-and-planning/city-public-realm/Pages/strategies.aspx.


10 Louise Bourgeois. 1999. "Has the day invaded the night, or has the night invaded the day?" no. 5 of 9 from the series What Is the Shape of This Problem? New York: Galerie Lelong.


12 "La Grande Traversée" was organized October 5-6, 2019, as part of the annual Nuit Blanche, or all-night cultural event. See https://www.paris.fr/pages/une-nuit-blanche-en-mouvement-6889.

REFERENCES


