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Pernocter.*A Short Journey through the Aesthetics and Imaginaries of the Night*

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Preface

Pernocter.[1] *A Short Journey through the Aesthetics and Imaginaries of the Night*

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> "When everything is darkness around you, literally and figuratively,
> it is that it is oneself who becomes the light to discover,
> the instance to work on, to extend."
>
> Patrick Chamoiseau

The night has long remained a forgotten dimension, a "terra incognita" little researched, as if left to fantasies and representations. Between insecurity and freedom, it still fascinates. Coloured by light and economic activities, it has recently become a key area of tension between individuals, groups and neighbourhoods of our cities that no longer live at the same pace. For the last twenty years, night has become part of the daytime news: holiday lightings, sleepless nights, but also light pollution, urban violence or noise pollution. We are progressively witnessing a trivialization of the night and of the night-time offer where the consumer component has become central in a context of territorial marketing and competition between cities. The public authorities, who have always sought to control it, are now interested in this fleeting and cyclical territory. In Europe, initiatives are proliferating in three main directions: improving the quality of life for residents through new services and the expansion of daytime activities, nightlife as part of territorial marketing and attractivity, and public tranquility or security. Better "councils" and "mayors of the night" have been set up in Geneva, London, Paris, New York, but also in small towns like Quimper or La Rochelle where specific public policies are being developed. The health crisis with the confinement and the return of the curfew in some countries

1. *Rare*. [In an antiquated style] Spend the night. *Every evening, these animals [jackdaws] fled the cathedral and only returned the next day, at dawn, after having overnighted in a forest three leagues from Chartres* (Huysmans, *Cathédr.*, 1898, p. 408). www.cnrtl.fr/definition/pernocter

has highlighted the importance of the night as a moment of silence but also of socializing. The energy crisis and climate change force us to think in terms of light moderation, and even to imagine a shift in summer activity towards the evening and night when conditions are more manageable. The night is now of interest to politicians, community professionals, the general public and also for human and social science research.

An emerging interdisciplinary field. The economy of the night, public policies, questions of mobility, insecurity, and light pollution are now explored by different disciplines from the angle of new geographies, but also from social, cultural, biological, ecological, political, and media viewpoints. For some years now, the field of night studies (Gwiadzinski, Maggioli and Straw 2020) has been gradually structured around an interdisciplinary approach to nocturnal space-time. Within this framework, and even if ethnographic methods and materials are often used in these various disciplines, ethnography, a diurnal science that has prioritized sight (Diamanti and Boudreault-Fournier 2021), has paid little attention to the night. In anthropology, the night also remained for a long time in the shadow of the day before a few researchers really took an interest in it (Becquelin and Galiner 2020; Diamanti and Boudreault-Fournier 2021; Galinier *et al.* 2010; Gonlin and Nowell 2018; Schnepel and Ben-Ari 2005).

A distinct imaginary. The concept of night is not an obvious one. Our Western societies are still very marked by the imaginary – for which a clear definition remains difficult to produce (Wunenburger 2006) – of the progress which would lead towards the light. The "dawn of time" is a very remote period of which we know nothing. The age of "enlightenment" has largely exploited the metaphor (Gwiazdzinski 2005). In this sense, all research is opposed to the night since "we legitimately ask thought to dispel the fogs and obscurities" (Morin 1990). Discovery is done in terms of clarification: we like to "chase away the darkness,» "shed light,» " clarify the situation " or make readable what was hidden. The researcher who tries to bring light to the night, to record its limits, forms, environments and uses, ends up objectifying it, putting it into equations (Deleuil 1993), at the risk of undoubtedly contributing to the destruction of the object of the research, its very essence. It is all the ambiguity of the night - "being able to be white and black at the same time" according to the cruciverbalists - and of the research.

The need for other approaches. The night is certainly one of the domains where the trio "knowledge, ignorance, mystery" is best revealed, inviting a "nocturnal thought" (Gwiazdzinski 2020) that allows for nuances.

The night is also an interesting place for learning other modes of research and thinking, and even a space-time for innovation (Gwiazdzinski 2005). It is not only a space-time on hold subject to the conquest of the day, a simple extension of the day, its negative counterpart, nor a day in reverse (Galinier *et al.* 2010). It is a particular space-time with its own environments, practices, uses, and representations that cannot be addressed with the same methods and analytical materials as in daylight. Beyond statistics, it is also towards immersion in the night, the mobilization of senses other than sight that research can be directed. One can also take an interest in the "imaginary" – which in psychoanalytical terminology, sometimes indicates "the recording of images, of projection, of identifications and, in a way, of illusion" – and which, in the Pascalian sense, is in opposition to reason – and in the sensory and aesthetic dimensions, that is to say, the a priori forms of perceptible knowledge: space for the external world and time for the internal world of the awareness.

An anticipation and ambitions. One could expect a lot from ethnography defined as "the descriptive and analytical study, in the field, of the manners, customs of given populations,"[2] and from the "ethnographic method" (Dufour *et al.* 1991) qualitative methodology, requiring the work in situ, the direct observation, even the participation of the researcher. The two editors invite us to this exploration of the night from its aesthetic, imaginary and sensory components, in the sense of the "aesthetically reimagined night" (Bronfen 2013) with reference to the imaginaries of the night enriched by writers, poets and filmmakers (Diamanti and Boudreault-Fournier 2021). This issue of *Ethnologies* aims to "foster debate by bringing together interdisciplinary articles on ethnographic studies that focus on the night from an imaginary and aesthetic point of view." The editors wish to "map nocturnal ethnographies and understand what impacts night has on the work of researchers and what kinds of tools and techniques are proposed to study the space-time that follows nightfall." They have succeeded in bringing together various disciplines and contributions by researchers from different backgrounds conducting ethnographic research on the night: from anthropology and ethnology to sociology and media studies to geography around a few questions. How do ethnographers conduct their research at night and on the night? Are there any special features of the 24-hour cycle that begins at dusk? All these questions allow us to sketch a composite landscape of the night, its inhabitants and patrons of yesterday and today, but also its explorers and their methods and materials, their different ways of spending the night.

2. www.cnrtl.fr/definition/ethnographie

A first mapping. This first international survey of "nocturnal ethnographies" – naturally impressionistic and incomplete – explores practices, temporalities and territories that have been little explored until now, such as "sung lullabies" (Levesque), "virtual dance" (Krisel) the "specters" linked to the marine zones of scattering of ashes and web platforms hosting the dead in the etheric world in Hong Kong (Lecuyer), the twilights of Scandinavia (Pardue) or the hospital corridor (Davies), an intermediary and ambiguous place with no specific activities, rules of conduct or dress codes. The nocturnal ethnography undertaken by the two editors in Cuba explores the island's night. The associated film – *Guardians of the Night – Guardianes de la noche* (2018) – shows the nocturnal daily lives of the guardians of the night on construction sites, in train stations, in bars, on buses, on bicycles, in the dimly lit streets of a drowsy, as if frozen, nocturnal Cuba. The slumped and tired bodies on the benches, the sidewalks, as if crumbled, contrast with that of a young dancer who works on her flexibility. The precise gestures of the baker who is busy. The general calm contrasts with some oasis of music. Everywhere the pale lights and the outdated atmospheres of a world in virtual standstill that is preparing to face the day, nibbling and gaining strength. Guards like ghosts, an almost fixed camera, a light musical background for a soft night dive. An aesthetic of slowness and of daily slowing down.

A range of ethnographic methods. The array of methods presented does indeed include a great deal of immersion "in the field," of firsthand observation, and even of the researcher's own participation and auto-ethnography, as Nick Dunn did, in order to develop broader and deeper knowledge of a located, relational, and practiced nature of the city after daylight. They also employ auto-ethnographic but also artistic approaches to listening and the body in the study of sung lullabies (Levesque). The spectral methodology used by Marie Lecuyer involves a multimedia and infra-linguistic ethnography of unconventional cemeteries. The panorama goes beyond contemporary nights with a historical approach based on the utilization of little-used materials, such as the specialized press of the thirties (Straw) or the analysis of philosophical and medical works such as Jayson Althofer's interest in the night work of children in the 19th century and nocturnal experiments on worthless bodies. For Chantal Meng the practice of night drawing becomes an active move to study and re-examine the night in a different way. Joshua Dittrich uses ethnography to examine the nocturnal practices of users of "so(m)niferous media." Based on classic surveys of young people in Montreal, a group of researchers (Cossette,

Moriceau, Braa, Couvy, Oder, Boucher and Amiraux) succeed in bringing to the fore a third dimension of the night in which the people interviewed attempt to live ordinary nocturnal activities, focused on the search for intimacy and tranquility.

Positions of progress and projections. Beyond the mere methodological advances and documentation of a phenomenon, the authors question the social consequences, take a stand and even commit themselves and predict: questioning what the advent of virtual dance parties may mean for the future of urban nightlife (Krisel), reflecting on and discussing our experience of and relationship to light (Meng), exploring the entanglements between light and dark, work and rest, creativity and place, and denouncing the consumer society that inserts itself even into sleep (Dittrich), imagining the implications of the study of sonic lullabies for music and peacebuilding research. Still others are looking for follow-ups and applications to their discoveries. Lauren Levesque looks ahead and believes that her work could contribute to interdisciplinary conversations about self-examination and performance as ethnographic access points to peace imaginaries in night studies. Nick Dunn, who is interested in those who inhabit the urban night through their work, engage with its aesthetics, and develop knowledge about these specific geographies, questions how multisensory experiences and the aesthetics of nocturnal places allow for a re-imagining of what these environments might be.

Beyond these first nocturnal ethnographies, these contributions allow us to discover and explore various ways of spending the night for both the reader and the researcher. They allow us to understand, without completely lifting the veil, the mysteries of this fascinating space-time and the practices of its inhabitants. Exploring urban nights also means learning to manage the contradictions and paradoxes of a super-modern society and its actors: illuminating the night without killing it.

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