

After Dark: temporal matter in the nighttime city

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This paper will seek to examine an underrepresented perspective on the nighttime urban landscape, and offer a new dialogue with the city. Cities are often understood as complex meshes of people, technologies and ‘animated spaces’ (Amin, 2015). However, the atmosphere of cities can change distinctly at night. For in the nocturnal hours identities become slippery, motives less easily defined, and architecture itself may appear far less assured of its role. Structures, rules and regulations that engender ‘tactile sterility’ (Sennett, 1994) in the urban realm quickly break down at night. The processes of change that occur when walking in the city and urban hinterlands at night may be understood as ‘inscriptive practice’ enriched with the potentialities that Bergson (1913) describes. Freed from the spaces of everyday life, the vectors of nighttime walking enable us to reconnect with the city and give things our undivided attention, which affords the ‘divining’ (De Boeck, 2015) of a different experience of place, providing a welcome respite from the ongoing erosion and subdivision of our time and sense of belonging in the world. I will therefore attempt to elucidate on the on-going entanglement that occurs at the boundaries of body and urban landscape; day and night; space and materiality.

The liminal landscape of the nocturnal city is an intersection of the physical and psychological state of being present. Away from the major thoroughfares, the nighttime city is an extension of the nightwalker as the buildings are buttoned up and the streets zip together to form long, sinewy paths with seldom activity. Various writers have sought to comprehend this ‘world without a name’ in order to understand the strange life hidden in the darkness of the city. As Bressani (2015, 33), writing about Balzac’s Paris and the introduction of gaslight to the city, describes:

It is no longer the world of insurgents and criminals but of a life radically *other* where the natural laws that govern daily life are no longer valid. As much as light contrasts its fairy magic to fetid obscurity, darkness reclaims its mystery facing the flood of light of the boulevards. There is a phantasmagoria of light, just as there is a phantasmagoria of darkness. One engenders the other, but each has its own character.

There is certainly an element to walking at night that has a close kinship to the ethos of wandering but for it to be solely this would be to suggest it is far more aimless and meandering than it often is. To go out walking into the nocturnal city is a decisive act. In the ever-accelerating velocity of contemporary society with all its attendant distractions, we are strangely rendered impotent toward creating the new.

Moving around cities in groups may be very difficult without official sanction, the right to protest becoming an increasingly limited act in real time due to dispersal

zones and policing strategies and then the subsequently poorly reported version with little fidelity to the passion and position of those involved. The growth of banned zones in cities within which people may be disbanded, moved on or even prosecuted for actions that would be widely understood as public and convivial or certainly not assumed to be criminalized including but not restricted to: dog walking, leafleting and gathering in what may feel like moderate numbers. Walking alone at night can also be subject to circumspection and suspicion. The seemingly unnatural, questionable and alien qualities of something so simple readily replays in our mental kaleidoscope of fear-crime-horror: endless combinations of bad things that could happen.

To be in a city is usually to be surrounded by life, the urban buzz of people, traffic, sights, sounds, smells and tastes all combine within the superorganism. Unlike a static backdrop, frozen or an empty vessel awaiting activity, the city wraps around and passes through you as its heady concoction pulls you into its rhythms, patterns and signals. During the daytime, cities may fizz with energies and exigencies, stirring the body within its soup and conforming it to within acceptable movements and behaviours. Anything and everything seems possible. But it is not. All is not as it initially appears to be. You don't need to look around for long for the signifiers of control and coercion to instruct you. Metal plate and plastic diktats applied on the city's surfaces telling us what to do, typically by virtue of informing us what *not* to do.

DO NOT RUN. NO BALL GAMES. NO SKATEBOARDING. NO LITTERING. NO LOITERING. ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR WILL NOT BE TOLERATED. NO ALCOHOL ZONE. NO SMOKING. NO VAPING. NO DOGS EXCEPT GUIDE DOGS. ONLY FOOD OR DRINK BOUGHT HERE MAY BE CONSUMED HERE. BIKES ATTACHED TO THESE RAILINGS WILL BE REMOVED. THE MANAGEMENT RESERVES THE RIGHT TO REFUSE ENTRY. SHOPLIFTERS WILL BE PROSECUTED. THESE PREMISES ARE SECURITY MARKED USING A DNA SYSTEM. CCTV IS IN OPERATION FOR YOUR SAFETY AND SECURITY. SMILE, YOU ARE ON CAMERA.

These boundaries seek to promote and protect certain ways of being in the city whilst explicitly demarcating and prohibiting other forms. This in turn establishes a collective subconscious of normative behaviour and actions that we tacitly accept through an osmosis-like process purely by being in the city. However, at night a strange transaction takes place. As the very edges of these boundaries become fuzzier and more porous, the enforcement is often much more forceful. The penetrating geometries of surveillance camera cones of vision, the illuminated yet empty office blocks and shops assume blocks of light that are unassailable, the public realm carefully scribed to engender adherence and conformity. But these city limits are plastic, difficult to truly enforce and based upon the servile collective's 'social' contract to not gather in too large a group, not to be too

unusual, not to make too much noise or be eerily too quiet either. Perturbation urbanism at its most potent, we are steered away from freedom of expression less we be not caught in the surreptitious force fields of expenditure, passive consumption and capsular space. The interdependency between body and space did not escape the attention of Henri Lefebvre (1991, 405), who noted:

the whole of (social) space proceeds from the body, even though it so metamorphoses the body that it may forget it altogether – even though it may separate itself so radically from the body as to kill it. The genesis of a far-away order can be accounted for only on the basis of the order that is nearest to us – namely, the order of the body. Within the body itself, spatially considered, the successive levels constituted by the senses (from the sense of smell to sight, treated as different within a differentiated field) prefigure the layers of social space and their interconnections.

What is this faraway order and how might we get there? In the context of this paper, this seemingly distant alternative may be understood as a new conception for thinking. It is one that is immediately *with* us and, exactly because of this proximity, has a mobility and durability that makes it flexible and instrumental for thinking about things away *from* us. To expand upon this notion a little further, it is the ongoing conversation between the body and the city that may enable us to question current approaches and think how best to implement alternatives. An ideal place for this is the nocturnal city since it offers respite from daily production and recuperation for ideas. It is these restorative qualities that are essential to enjoying the freedom of thought that nightwalking promotes.

One of the key points here is the disappearance of the nocturnal city as it undergoes processes to comprehensively absorb it within the rules and regulations that make cities so successful during the day. These concerns have occupied the work of Paul Virilio, who dedicated four of his most influential essays to the ongoing shift of the dark matter of the city into light. These texts examine the motives behind what he terms the ‘rise of the false days of technoculture’ wherein we are forced to accept the ‘ultracity’ of physiological abject and total displacement. It is the first of these essays, *The Big Night*, which we shall examine further here. This text focuses on the loss of purpose for circadian rhythms and natural light in cities. The proliferation of what he terms ‘night tables’: screens, consoles and to which we may add smartphones which were not in widespread circulation at the time of his essay, suggests a fundamental switch. Through our technological roaming, on the internet or otherwise, we are supplanting a very real sociocultural need to explore the physical world and give it our attention. In fact even if we are awake at night, it is a zombie state, ‘an absolute reversal of biological cycles, with inhabitants dozing by day, awake at night’ (Virilio, 2000, 4). This is not a state of being in polar opposition to the daytime but a more nuanced version of it. As we are complicit in this

transformation, Virilio (Ibid, 7) observes that, 'by freeing ourselves from natural lighting (from cosmological time, we have, in just over two centuries, come to resemble moles roaming in a *beam of light*, moles whose view of the world does not indeed amount to much.' Here we can understand the complexity of the situation. It is not that we are unaware of what is changing even if we are unable to sense how pervasive, subtle and fully it is shifting. More problematic is an inability to stop ourselves: data obesity as urban pandemic and substitute for a real connection with our environment and those around us. Perhaps to fully appreciate what we are losing it is more helpful to think of what and when we might benefit.

The distinctions that are clearer and sharper in the city during the day are spongy here at night. It becomes hard for the urban nightwalker to easily decipher this integration. As Tim Ingold (2011, 119) has observed, 'the more one reads into the land, the more difficult it becomes to ascertain with any certainty where substances end and the medium begins.' Conceived in this way, it is possible to understand first-hand encounter as relational rather than absolute. This correlates with anthropological work on vectors since they are inherently *motile* and point toward the enduring and fluctuating nature of relationships (Gatt 2013). This indeterminacy and fluidity is key to understanding our environment and our contingent roles within it and with each other. Rather than fixed and solid, the city and its edge zones at night may evolve into the terrain vague, described by Lévesque (2002) as:

an indeterminate space without precise boundaries ... a place ... outside the circuit of the productive structures of the city, an internal, uninhabited, unproductive and often dangerous island, simultaneously on the margins of the urban system and a fundamental part of the system ... the counter image of the city, both in the sense of a critique and a clue for a possible way to go beyond.

This is the city after dark.