Night as Commons: Minor Architecture and Dayfaring Citizens

Lucía Jalón Oyarzun

EPILLOGUE (BY WAY OF PROLOGUE)

34 March 2016. Only a few weeks after finishing this article, a popular movement gathers around the hashtag #NuitDebout (Night on Our Feet) in Paris to protest the French government’s latest labour reform. Social media accounts from Place de la République, where the gathering takes place, describe how the first night’s festive atmosphere is transformed into strategic will on the second: in the live videos streamed from within the square, anonymous and eager voices weave this desire to organize and work together with the stirring darkness of the night. There is a radical power vibrating in that darkness, and somehow it seems almost natural that reclaiming the political—beyond the police post-politics of our time1—must be accompanied by a claim for night and darkness. Why is that?

15 May 2011. The words dormíamos, despertamos (“we slept, we awoke”), still trigger, whenever they are pronounced, the energy liberated by the Spanish 15-M movement. We slept with a sleep of disinterest and detachment. But, surely, not that distance of rest that simultaneously affirms the world and its sensual rhythms. We slept with the disturbing sleep of the sleep-walker, trapped in a perpetual apathetic movement. Automatons incapable of distinguishing night from day, unable of finding rest in darkness, nor of living in daylight.
In the early 1990s, a team of Russian scientists developed Znamya, a project to launch a vast mirror-satellite that would eventually illuminate certain areas of the Earth’s surface with the intensity of several full-moons (fig. 1). The notion of a perpetual day and thus open up the discussion about a right of autonomy, and was subsequently met with derision and mistrust. However, its use has recently shifted to being untraceable or unrecorded. This second sense of obscuring oneself requires us to read the grid beyond its classical infrastructural referent (i.e. electricity or water networks), not only as a sectorial organizational device, but as the functional counterpart of modern capitalism. Accordingly, “going off-the-grid” means producing a field of darkness around oneself against a system that works under the premise of constant illumination. “Going dark” is another such expression. Initially, it described a soldier’s or a spy’s decision to suspend any kind of communication in order to protect himself, a camouflage of silence. However, its latest use describes either a period of disconnection from the internet, or, in intelligence jargon, entering communication channels inaccessible to the monitoring eye. It implies the creation of an envelope of darkness as defense, a haven whose activity unfolds parallel to the field of visibility but out of its reach, which means that it constantly causes suspicion. This is nothing new; from the beginning of time, night has always engendered some form or other of mistrust and disquiet. Not only does darkness compromise our senses and becomes a source of alarm, but also because it disquiets us. This notion is at the core of the modern biopolitical project, whose overarching field of vision is night. To think of the night as commons —and thus open up the discussion about a right to the night—implies considering the double dimension of the commons, as both a natural resource and a shared production. First and foremost, night is a physical reality linked to our own animal condition. We need to sleep to survive, but also to keep our imagination and creativity alive, and thus any political sphere is interconnected with night. Night works as a field of virtuality, a dimension of unresolved potentiality teeming with the still to come. However, there is a second meaning: the shared production of night or darkness as both physical and conceptual spheres of freedom where potentiality can breathe. We have already noted some of the diverse meanings attached to darkness and light, night and day, sleep and wakefulness. Throughout this text we will try to move through them in order to present the various aspects of night and darkness.

The term “off-the-grid” was first employed in the early 1990s to describe a self-sufficient lifestyle in which the supply of water, electricity, or any other typically public utility was autonomously secured. “Going off-the-grid” signified a political affirmation of autonomy, and was subsequently met with derision and mistrust. However, its use has recently shifted to being untraceable or unrecorded. This second sense of obscuring oneself requires us to read the grid beyond its classical infrastructural referent (i.e. electricity or water networks), not only as a sectorial organizational device, but as the functional counterpart of modern capitalism. Accordingly, “going off-the-grid” means producing a field of darkness around oneself against a system that works under the premise of constant illumination. “Going dark” is another such expression. Initially, it described a soldier’s or a spy’s decision to suspend any kind of communication in order to protect himself, a camouflage of silence. However, its latest use describes either a period of disconnection from the internet, or, in intelligence jargon, entering communication channels inaccessible to the monitoring eye. It implies the creation of an envelope of darkness as defense, a haven whose activity unfolds parallel to the field of visibility but out of its reach, which means that it constantly causes suspicion. This is nothing new; from the beginning of time, night has always engendered some form or other of mistrust and disquiet. Not only does darkness compromise our senses and grows distant, and even the honest professions which are necessarily practiced at night attract suspicions. To sleep with open eyes is an anomaly symbolically indicating something which the general consciousness does not approve of. People who sleep badly always appear more or less guilty. What do they do? They make night present.
No human being can survive more than eleven days without sleeping. With a lack of sleep, our senses are compromised, our attention and perception altered, and normal signs like noises or movements might cause unexpected responses. “Perhaps sleep is inattentive to the world,” wrote Maurice Blanchot, “but this negation of the world conserves us for the world and affirms the world. Sleep is an act of fidelity and of union. I entrust myself to the great natural rhythms, to the laws, to the stability of order. My sleep is the realization of this trust, [...] an attachment.”22 Besides the physical, we see how an excess of public light can also be political and social action.23 The pervasive gaze of social media upon us risks annihilating our private and intimate realms, that is, the space where an and intimate realms, that is, the space where an and intimate realms, that is, the space where an 

LIVING WITH NO NIGHT

The disordered physical experience of a tampered perception, unable to recognize noises; even if only that of a leaf in the depths of the forest, it triggers the imagination.”29 In the following pages we interrogate the path that we are in to this total illumination and the progressive annihilation of the night. First, we journey back to a time when night still existed as a differentiated realm. After that, we present the evolution of the night in a truly reliable way. Our bodies, thus blinded by an excess of light, are abandoned to a new state of physical vulnerability and political alienation.

In the following pages we interrogate the path that we are in to this total illumination and the progressive annihilation of the night. First, we journey back to a time when night still existed as a differentiated realm. After that, we present the evolution of the night in a truly reliable way. Our bodies, thus blinded by an excess of light, are abandoned to a new state of physical vulnerability and political alienation.

In the following pages we interrogate the path that we are in to this total illumination and the progressive annihilation of the night. First, we journey back to a time when night still existed as a differentiated realm. After that, we present the evolution of the night in a truly reliable way. Our bodies, thus blinded by an excess of light, are abandoned to a new state of physical vulnerability and political alienation.
and extensive program of official night-time entertainment, and, second, through the concerted policing of the nocturnal city.

The new diversions served another purpose: to elaborate and stage a new political idiom based on the befuddlement of the senses. The new sovereigns were looking to substitute religion as the source of authority, and they were going to do it by articulating a new relation towards darkness. By the second half of the seventeenth century, the most elaborate spectacles linking entertainment and political symbolism had become essential tools of governments throughout Europe, and nighttime was their preferred background. Events that only a century before had been celebrated by daylight were now turned into nocturnal festivals of astounding fireworks and illuminations (figs. 3 and 4).

However, it was Louis XIV, the Sun King, who instituted the most complex and pervasive strategy to articulate this new symbolic order, and alongside it the modern experience of the night/day cycle. The elaborate and flamboyant image of a fourteen-year-old Louis dressed as Apollo, god of the sun, has become one of his most canonical representations (fig.5). The first time he personified this image was on 23 February 1663, during the first performance of the Ballet du soleil.34 The piece, staged over the course of a single night, culminated with the blazing entrance of the king, dressed in gold against a dark background and impersonating the sun as new organizing force of the cosmos. He spoke: “Without doubt I belong to the World I serve; I exist not for myself but for the Universe. To it I owe the sunny beams that crown my head. It is my duty to regulate the time and the seasons, and Order will not suffer pleasure to keep me from my work” (emphasis added). When he went on stage that evening, he was also entering the larger stage of contemporary politics to announce and assert a blinding solar force that demanded to be reckoned with: the symbolic embodiment as ruler and organizer of time and the seasons, which would inform his policies and transform the role and meaning of light, visibility, and order—within the new sovereign state.

POLICING THE NOCTURNAL CITY

It was also around this time that nocturnality became an aggravating circumstance for most crimes. Inherent in the already mentioned suspicion against the night, and departing from an etymological correlation between night (nox) and harm (nocere), early—modern legal theory considered that every activity undertaken by night implied a higher degree of premeditation.35 This is why, from the very beginning, the street-lighting system of Paris was part of a larger surveillance strategy. It was created in 1667 as one of the newly founded police responsibilities. Tasked with control over an incredibly heterogeneous set of spheres—from morality and hygiene, to crime and public festivities—this new administrative force radically transformed the city. It changed its uncontrollable heterogeneity, with its overlapping jurisdictions and ambiguous borders, into a homogenous field of visibility through a process of gridding or quadrillage. Every quartier, until then a singular spatial mesh of powers and practices whose geography wasn’t officially defined, was turned into a clearly bounded cell visible to the central eye of the Police Lieutenant (fig.6).36 And by night, this field of police visibility needed to be made physically visible.

LET THERE BE LIGHT: THE STREET-LIGHTING SYSTEM

“Compared with Paris, the darkest and loneliest forest is a safe retreat,” wrote Nicolas Boileau in 1665.37 Pretty soon the nocturnal atmosphere of the city had changed radically, and less than a century later Adrian-Joseph de Valois d’Orville prophetically wrote that “the kingdom of the night is now going to end.”38 It was only fitting that the Sun King should install the first street—lighting system in Europe, and though many cities would soon follow suit, Paris’s remained special, as it combined both physical and symbolic roles. It lit everything that might take place within the police field and submitted it to the gaze of the State. However, as each lamp became a symbol of the king, it also made that eye visible to the gaze within—and through it, the sovereign’s power reached every illuminated street of the city.

The system, which began with 3,000 lamps lit every night until two in the morning, included around 7,000 a century later. They were placed every sixty to ninety feet, and far from creating a continuous field of light, they mostly drew a dotted line of bright points to follow. Like beacons they “casted a diffuse halo, often opaque, rather than a brightness capable of rendering clear the outlines of things and people.”39 The general distribution across the city was also uneven, as central neighborhoods were favoured over the outskirts.

The first lamps were crystal lanterns with a candle within that hung transversally across the street. This position, avoided elsewhere because it obstructed traffic, was essential in Paris, where its overreaching centrality held a symbolic importance that overshadowed any disturbance it might cause (fig.7). The hanging lanterns were akin to the focal tower of Bentham’s panopticon, which...
explained their frequent vandalism and the severity of the resulting punishment. While breaking a lantern in London resulted in a simple fine, in Paris the offender might find himself chained up or rowing in the Galleys.40

Following Bachelard’s statement that “everything that casts a light sees,” we can assume that within any system of surveillance switching a light off acquires a rebellious and strategic meaning. Breaking lanterns and reclaiming darkness often sought to assume that within any system of surveillance “everything that casts a light sees,” we can explain their frequent vandalism and the severity of the resulting punishment. While breaking a lantern in London resulted in a simple fine, in Paris the offender might find himself chained up or rowing in the Galleys.40

Finally, we cannot forget the mobile and living part of the lighting infrastructure, embodied in the porte-flambeaux. These light-bearers for hire would light one’s way in the middle of the night. Like the rest of the street-lighting system, they were active agents of surveillance. A vast network of police informants, they reported each morning to their corresponding superintendent every thing seen or heard the night before.43 In less than fifty years, the State had thus arranged a vast, homogenous field of visibility where police intelligence traveled fast and control was strictly maintained.

In 1667, the Gazette de Robinet proclaimed that with the new street-lighting system, “the night will feel like broad daylight.”44 Could we affirm that today the process is nearing completion, at least in some parts of our planet? If the first 3,000 lanterns illuminating Paris created a diffuse halo incapable of rendering clear the outline of things, our present excess casts that diffuse gleam onto our night city skies, making it impossible to outline even the brightest constellations.45 Meanwhile, in a race towards absolute daylight, more and more cities aspire to be the best 24/7 urban playgrounds imaginable,46 and the modern State’s divertissements and fireworks pale against the new forms of official entertainment. Still mediated by the State, they are nonetheless promoted by the overpowering rule of the capitalist market seeking to overlap a non-stop daylight experience with a non-stop consumption cycle.47 This cycle is made pervasively ubiquitous through networks like Facebook and Twitter, where production and consumption dissolve into one another and reshape our anxious perceptions, and we’re ever fearful of missing out48 while drowning in endless hours of blue–lit insomnia.49 If we broke the lanterns today, we would not be reclaiming our neighborhoods, but the most fundamental of territories: our body’s numbed sensorium, and along with it the possibility of regaining a material awareness of the world—and maybe our freedom.50

This fast-paced race towards total illumination forced the grid to adapt as well. In “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” DiCruz offers significant clues for understanding this shift. First and foremost, he outlines the transformation of the grid from tabulating device to a modulating sieve: “Enclosures are molds, distinct castings, but controls are a modulation, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point.”51 If there is still a field of visibility, it is produced rather differently. Against the panoptical field of the quadrillage, the spatiality of the sieve does not rely on cells, rather focusing directly on the individual particles moving through them. The walls that discipline and channel the performances of those bodies have accordingly been substituted by complex, subjectivity-modulating infrastructures. While Ravi Sundaram advances the notion of “sensory infrastructure,” a volatile emergent combination of pirate tactics, media forms, and paralegal spaces, Kazys Varnelis’s recent research points to the role of electromagnetic forces in the configuration of “the new modularized world of invisible fields.” Fields whose consequences are, nonetheless,
relations between the political—as power to compose our own affective strategy with the world—and space. We will now try to sum up the highlights of this analysis and their meaning in terms of a “minor architecture.” First, the medieval experience of the night, with its compromised senses and faulty perceptual map, pointed us to the body as source of all architectural endeavor. We are not reclaiming a renewed anthropocentric approach, nor limiting the body to mere user or measure of the cosmos. On the contrary, we want to explore the body as creator of an individual spatiality: a physical materiality that creates a relational field around it linking the actual and the virtual—that is, not only what a body does, also what a body can do. This implies a broader materialist understanding of the body, one that goes beyond the human. The spatial organization of our medieval town forces us to acknowledge the spatiality created by the candle that must be exhausted by curfew or that of the animals and trees sending out unsettling sounds through darkness.

Second, we saw how any strategy of control needs to deploy a field of visibility, and in order to do that, it needs to dematerialize the complexity of any given territory by flattening the historically entangled layers of flesh, meaning, and practice into a new abstract plane. When the people of Paris revolted against light, it was the common spatiality of their quarter they were defending, the physical and historical entanglement of individual spatialities in play. The quarter’s political community did not derive from an abstract identity assigned by the administration; rather it emerged out of singular relations as a common fabric. Furthermore, its inhabitants were fully aware that their accurate territorial expertise was key to their political autonomy, and they rebelled against its expropriation.

Finally, the configuration of the diffuse glow of capitalism, and the endless superposition of oligoptica, forces us to acknowledge the subject of form and limit. Beyond the idea of limit as a perfectly defined

Night as Commons: Minor Architecture and Dayfaring Citizens

By outlining the historical transformation of this night-light-control assemblage, we have tried to grasp more accurately the deep

Night: Insurgencies

light has been substituted for the diffuse glow within a simulated real, itself the source of object, broadens to include the scope of the bodily and the virtual, incorporating both individual and common spatialities.

These entail other necessary considerations: number turns from arithmetical to organizing device, geometry from quantification to relation, structure from equilibrium to metastability. And finally, we shift from the idea of construction to that of composition. The production of night will be thus understood as the encompassing of minor spatial compositions that rearticulate our everyday relation to light and darkness, publicity and secrecy, officiality and the clandestine, by operating with individual and common spatialities. Architecture thus regains its classical connection with war, strategy and the disposition of bodies and forces.

We can now perhaps understand “going off-the-grid,” as an act that threads the absolute illumination of our simulated real with bodily trajectories of material darkness. “Our encryption is the real world,” says Mr. Robot, in the 2015 TV series of the same name, when explaining the workings of his Anonymous-like hacker cell. Against the digital invisibility of the traditional hacker, could it be that blind spots are hidden today in plain sight? That only the unrepresentable complexity of the physical world can offer enough opacity and night in plain sight. Against the impoverished abstract plane of capitalism’s simulated real, Mr. Robot speaks of a different real, one that encompasses virtuality to gain depth (in the most literal sense).

At the beginning of this article we linked virtuality and night as commons, a field of unresolved potentiality teeming with the still-to-come. It is this ambiguous potentiality of the night that we reclaim and where all the images explored within this piece come together. They share the same need: to keep some darkness around to be free and alive. When discussing the nocturnal experience of the Middle Ages, historian Jean Verdon writes of many clever and skilled “nightfaring” men and women who in the darkest of nights knew how to see in a world only illuminated by their experienced senses. Maybe we could talk today of dayfaring citizens, people who observe and understand the inner physics and material effects of absolute illumination to revolt and create night (fig. 8).

I want to thank Pedro Hernández (@laperiferia) for the conversations that made possible this text.

NOTES

4. Characteristically, it was also around that time the expression 24/7, in the sense of an around the clock availability, was born. Some sources point to drug dealers as first users of this expression. In any case, by the early 90s it had expanded into the broader business world.


The Moulin Rouge hotel and casino in Las Vegas significantly advanced the struggle for civil rights for Black Americans, building upon a liberal optimism that had attracted several Black American artists and performers to Paris decades earlier. The Jazz Age in Paris and the Harlem Renaissance in New York during the interwar years marked a period of emancipation for Black entertainers amid festering racist resentment in the United States. In order to understand the crucial role nightlife architecture played in facilitating social change during the civil rights movement, we will first examine the increased social mobility gained by African-American women in Paris as a precursor to the history of Black people accessing education, gainful employment, and adequate housing in Las Vegas. Several key events defined the struggle for civil rights, leading to the end of segregation in the region, in which the now-demolished Moulin Rouge building played a large role.

In 1951, world-renowned American-born, Paris-based performer Josephine Baker defied American segregation laws at the El Rancho Hotel on the Las Vegas Strip by demanding that Black patrons be permitted into the casino’s theatre to watch her show. Baker remained on stage, refusing to perform, until all Black ticket-holders had been granted entrance to the theatre and seated amongst their white counterparts. At a time when discriminatory Jim Crow laws dominated much of American public life, Baker’s contract boldly stipulated that she would only perform for integrated audiences, a seemingly impossible feat, particularly in Las Vegas, described by Sarann Knight-Preddy (the first Black casino-owner) as the “Mississippi of the West.” A large share of the population in Las Vegas was comprised of poor southern whites who had moved to the region for well-paying construction jobs at the nearby Hoover Dam, bringing with them entrenched racist views. Prior to her performance at the El Rancho, Baker had achieved widespread success in Paris. She arrived in France with