

The nocturne as cultural form

Lo nocturno como forma cultural

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ABSTRACT

Virtually all forms of cultural expression, from painting to music, cinema and sculpture, have engaged in multiple ways with the world of the night. Versions of the “nocturne” have emerged at different points to identify artistic practices in which the night functions as a deeply-rooted sensibility rather than merely a theme or setting. This article looks at versions of the cultural and artistic “nocturne” as they have evolved over the last several centuries. Insofar as versions of the “nocturne” presume some form of adequation between experiences of the night and the forms or styles through which it is captured in discourse they return us to many of the fundamental questions in the analysis of cultural artefacts.

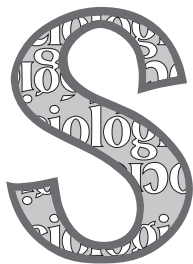
KEYWORDS: nocturne, culture, darkness, arts, aesthetics.

RESUMEN

Prácticamente todas las formas de expresión cultural, desde la pintura a la música, el cine y la escultura, se han comprometido de múltiples maneras con el mundo de la noche. Algunas versiones de lo “nocturno” han surgido en diferentes momentos con el objetivo de identificar las prácticas artísticas en las cuales la noche funciona como una sensibilidad con raíces profundas más que solamente como un tema o un escenario. Este artículo examina las diferentes versiones de lo “nocturno” en sus facetas cultural y artística a partir de su evolución en los últimos siglos. En este sentido, mientras que las diferentes versiones de lo “nocturno” suponen alguna forma de adecuación entre las experiencias de la noche y los estilos y maneras en que éstas se captan en los discursos, al mismo tiempo nos remiten a muchas de las preguntas fundamentales en el análisis de los dispositivos culturales.

PALABRAS CLAVE: nocturno, cultura, oscuridad, artes, estética.

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2010, a significant number of museums, art galleries and cultural institutions around the world have organized exhibitions devoted to the night. Some of these have chronicled the social and historical experiences of the night in specific cities, bringing together visual images and material artefacts (such as films excerpts and nightclub flyers) of a popular or commercial character¹. Alongside the illustrated catalogues which have accompanied most of these exhibitions, a steady stream of recent books has gathered together similar visual materials to document histories of the night in such cities as Rio de Janeiro and Mexico City².

During the same period, a large number of other exhibitions, focussed on established artistic genres such as painting or fine art photography, have traced the history of artists'

¹ Exhibitions with these themes include "HK:PM, Hong Kong Night Life 1974-1989," Central's Blue Lotus Gallery, Hong Kong (2017), "Lentejuelas en la noche. Bataclanas, rumberas y exóticas, 1920-1960, Museo Nacional de las Culturas del Mundo, Mexico City (2019), "Here Comes the Night. Club Culture in Munich," Münchner Stadtmuseum, Munich, Germany (2021), "Night Fever: Designing Club Culture," V&A Dundee, Scotland (2021), "La noche nos pertenece, que se present," Museo Nacional de San Carlos, Mexico City Mexico (2023), "Nocturnas: mientras la ciudad duerme . . . 1900-1960," Acción Cultural Española, multiple cities, 2021-2022.

² See, for example, Leo Feijó and Marcus Wagner, *Rio cultura de noite: uma história da noite carioca*, Rio de Janeiro: Editions Leya, 2014; Leonel Sagahon and Fabrizio León, *Vivir la Noche. Historias en la Ciudad de Mexico*, Mexico City: Conaculta, 2014; Antoine de Baecque, *Les Nuits Parisiennes XVIIIe-XXIe Siècle*. Paris: Editions du seuil, 2015.

engagement with the visual, sonic and experiential features of the night³. These exhibitions have often been accompanied by critical essays seeking to develop the concept of a “nocturne” specific to each artistic medium. The substantive term “nocturne”, in English (and, with slight variation, in most Latin-derived languages) designates artistic works which in some way express properties of the night. A great deal of scholarly writing has been devoted to literary nocturnes, musical nocturnes and the nocturnal in painting - genres with long histories and canonical status within their respective artistic fields. Less developed (and more recent) definitions of the nocturne have been advanced by scholars and critics studying cultural forms such as sculpture, cinema, fashion, and architecture.

This article will trace the ways in which the idea of a “nocturne” has been applied to different kinds of cultural expression. The corpus of materials examined here consists of a large number of scholarly and critical writings published, for the most part, in English and French since the 1990s. Some of these writings are explicitly engaged in the attempt to define a genre of the nocturne within a specific cultural field (like painting or poetry.) Other writings, often of a more speculative character, will offer claims about the intermittent ways in which cultural forms like vestimentary fashion or the built environ-

³ Examples of these exhibits include “Paris la nuit: Chroniques nocturnes,” at l’Arsenal in Paris (2013), “Night Vision: Nocturnes in American Art, 1860-1960” Bowden College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine, United States (2015), “Into the Night: Modern and Contemporary Art and the Nocturne Tradition,” Tuscon Museum, Tuscon, Arizona, United States (2016), “Nocturnal Landscapes: Urban Flows of Global Metropolises,” MAS Context and the Instituto Cervantes of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, United States (2019), “Nocturne,” Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, Ontario, Canada (2020), “Bonjour la Nuit,” Festival du regard, Cergy-Pointoise, France (2022), “Nocturno,” Museo Nacional del Grabado, Buenos Aires, Argentina (2023), “Nocturne: Into the Night Together,” Museum of Lennix and Addington, Kingston, Ontario, Canada (2023), “Nocturnes: Night Scenes from GRAM’s Collection,” Grand Rapids Art Museum, Grand Rapids, Michigan, United States (2023), “Voir La Nuit,” Musée national des beaux arts du Québec, Quebec, Canada (2024), “Tejiendo la mañana: vida moderna y experiencia nocturna en el arte brasileño,” Pinacoteca de São Paulo São Paulo, Brazil (2025).

ment express a sense of “nightness.” Rather than focusing on all those ways in which artists may represent the night, this article is concerned with efforts to elaborate an aesthetic (a cluster of themes, techniques, styles and forms) through which art forms might capture features of the night deemed to be distinctive and essential.

This article will follow artistic encounters with the night as they move from a focus on the night’s sensory or atmospheric dimensions to more complex considerations of the night’s relationships to knowledge, history and social relationships. We shall see how, in the nineteenth century, painting would be understood as a medium for registering historical changes in the technological and social dimensions of city life. Later still, aesthetic doctrines and artistic experiments would imagine the night as many other things – as a refuge from the social world, a laboratory for new kinds of relationships, a stage for human performance or the repository of alternative sorts of knowledge.

METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

One of the problems which the category of nocturne has posed to critical discourse is that of its ontological status. Philippe Dubois has summarized this problem succinctly: “is it [the nocturne] a form, an (aesthetic) category, a genre, an effect, an atmosphere, a *dispositif*?” (Dubois, 2021, 14). The night, in artistic works, may be a temporal setting, a philosophical theme, or a loosely perceived “mood”, but there is disagreement as to whether the presence of any one of these in a work will justify its designation as an example of the nocturne. Confronted with the explicitly nighttime landscapes in a nineteenth century painting and the loose, intermittent sense of “nightness” evoked in a mid-twentieth-century popular song, can we credibly claim both as examples of the same aesthetic category? Do the photographs of nighttime revellers taken by the American artist Nan Goldin (and collected in her

1986 book *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*) fit usefully within histories of the photographic nocturne? Or do other contexts (such as that of a feminist “photographic turn” in the 1980s (Jansen, 2016) help us to situate this work more effectively? In more schematic terms, what does it mean for one genre of cultural expression to be defined in terms of a section of the 24-hour cycle when no categories with equivalent stature have been advanced in relation to other parts of that cycle. Is the nocturne a useful aesthetic category if it cannot be set against an equally developed notion of the “diurnal”?

To these challenges of definition, we might the more prosaic questions posed within sociologies of taste and value. Do artistic representations of the night, more than those of many other phenomena, run the constant risk of a degradation into kitsch or cliché? Has the artistic genre of the nocturne been able to accrue to itself the prestige and solidity of other genres (like that of “landscape” in painting) or is it too easily dismissed as little more than a loose collection of overly-familiar clichés and pleasures? Since the middle of the nineteenth century, as artistic fields have responded to the rise of abstraction and successive crises of representation, have creative engagements with the night been able to participate in these developments? Or does the night too obviously function simply as the carrier of moods and atmospheres - features which are imported from outside the artistic work rather than revealing deeper truths about artistic forms.

HISTORIES OF THE ARTISTIC NOCTURNE

We may carry these questions with us through key moments in the history of the artistic nocturne within Western culture. It is common, in such histories, to explain the emergence of the nocturne through shifts in the understanding of the night during the transition from the medieval and baroque eras to the early modern world. For the artistic nocturne to be possible, it is claimed, the night must first be tamed and “aestheticized,”

shedding its prior associations with superstition and diabolical forces (Souiller, 2013: 92).

Historians of the Western European night, such as Craig Koslofsky, have described this transition within a larger account of what we might call the taming of the night, its transformation from a frightening netherworld into a pleasing spectacle. In the first sage of this process, Koslofsky suggests, sovereign elites (such as Kings) appropriated the mystical, fearful qualities of the night, - long manipulated by the holders of religious power - to bolster their own claims to power and divine right. In Koslofsky's words, "[r]ulers had long presented themselves as light-givers and identified themselves with the sun, but in the baroque age princes deliberately used the chiaroscuro of light in the night to intensify these images, which began to supplement (though not supplant) traditional Christian symbols of power and authority" (Koslofsky, 2011: 92; see also Wishnitzer, 2021: 173.)

With the subsequent rise of the urban middle classes, and with technological advancements in the domain of illumination – from candlelight to gas lighting and, later, to electricity - the night shed most of its associations with demonic evil. From the eighteenth century onward, the night would derive much of its character from the spectacles of public sociability and capitalist productivity which became a significant part of city life. Across these transformations, the fearful dimensions of the night did not disappear, but were cast in new terms. Just as the pleasures of the night were now "socialized" – located within the rituals of night-time gathering and entertainment - so, too, were its dangers. If the night-time city was still a fearful place, by the late nineteenth century, this was because it harboured social classes and marginal communities (like those of bohemian subcultures) which threatened economic and moral order. Even these inhabitants of the night, however, could be aestheticized within representations which cast them as part of the rich variety of contemporary life. A sense of the night as the domain of supernatural forces might persist, in

genres like the gothic novel or, later, the horror film, but these genres would find themselves more and more relegated to the margins of cultural prestige. The irrational dimensions of the night would be “tamed,” as well, through the artistic interest in dreams, which movements like Romanticism and, later, Surrealism would understand as repositories of individual inspiration rather than collective fear.

POETIC AND MUSICAL NOCTURNES

In his history of the nocturne as a genre within English poetry, literary scholar Chris Fitter sees its emergence as signalling a new acceptance of the night as the domain of tranquil beauty, rather than a fearful realm of divine and supernatural forces. This transition, for Fitter, is exemplified in the difference between representations of the night found in William Shakespeare’s play *Henry VI* (1591-92) and a poem written almost a century later, John Norris’ “Hymn to Darkness” (1687). In the first of these works, the night is the time for summoning spirits from Hell; it is that period in the 24-hour cycle in which, in Shakespeare’s words, “spirits walk, and ghosts break up their graves.” By the time of John Norris’ poem, Fitter suggests, the night had changed, from “those cold, dead and sunless hours feared by most of mankind” into “an order of exquisite and numinous experience” (Fitter, 1997). Norris is ready to accept the darkness of night as his muse rather than the cover behind which horrific forces reside. Literary scholar Susan Stewart, writing about many of the first poetic nocturnes in English, comments on the varieties of new knowledge to be found in an exploration of the night: “In the dark, new modes of moving, touching, smelling, and seeing are sparked and enlarged.” (Stewart, 2012: 291). The night is no longer a fearful barrier to knowledge but, rather, a domain in which a rich variety of sensual engagements with the world are made possible.

Of the various artistic engagements with the night, the European musical nocturne of the nineteenth century would

prove the most successful in putting into circulation the very idea of an artistic nocturne. On *Youtube*, it is possible to listen to ten hours of musical nocturnes by the composer Frédéric Chopin with one click of the mouse button, or to a playlist with the title “Top 50 Most Popular Nocturnes.” These playlists, which draw upon the nineteenth century canon of Western classical music, sit aside others with titles like “Nocturnes & Waltzes for Deep Focus, Relaxation, and Inspiration” or “3 Hours Chopin for Studying, Concentration, and Relaxation.” This framing of the musical nocturne as an effective tool for inducing tranquil moods or therapeutic states of mind perpetuates a view of the nocturne which, almost from the moment of its emergence, threatened its status within musical canons.

In his book *New York Nocturne: The City After Dark in Literature, Painting, and Photography*, William Chapman Sharpe suggests that the popularity of musical nocturnes in the nineteenth century carried the very term “nocturne” into public consciousness, laying the groundwork for to its self-conscious take-up by painters, photographers and others. The popular appeal of nocturnes by the composers Edward Field and Frédéric Chopin rested on their capacity to evoke a sense of pleasant reverie, one that expressed, in Sharpe’s words, “rural moonlight on gently rippling water” (Sharpe, 2008: 80). For the urban dwellers who formed the musical nocturne’s main audiences, the genre’s appeal lay in its capacity to evoke the imagined natural rhythms of the world outside of cities.

In an extensive analysis of critical responses to musical nocturnes in the nineteenth century, Jeffrey Kallberg shows how the form was derided for its superficial sentimentality. Critics castigated the genre for dealing in simple emotions (the lightly felt melancholy of romantic “longing”) and for employing overly basic forms (the repetitious “round.”) What distinguished the musical nocturne, critic G. W. Fink wrote in 1834, was its capacity to express the “reveries of a soul fluctuating from feeling to feeling in the still of the night” (quoted

in Kallberg, 1992: 104). All these features of the musical nocturne, Kallberg notes, led to its being dismissed as a “feminine” genre whose listeners gave themselves over willingly to its manipulative play upon their emotions (Kallberg 1992: 104-05).

A very different version of the musical nocturne would take shape in the United States, from the 1920s onward, when music employing the instrumentation and stylistic features of African American jazz was used to express the atmospheres of the urban night. In the many recordings of the composition “Harlem Nocturne” (written by Earle Hagen in 1939), for example, a sense of the night is conveyed through the “loneliness” of a single saxophone, a motif which would become common in media representations of the city at night. This evocation of solitude would soon be accompanied, in such representations, by a variety of features associated with night-time menace and mystery, such as rhythms which suggested flight or orchestral flourishes signalling moments of danger. By the mid 1950s, soundtrack music performed by small jazz combos would be used in urban crime films and television series, produced in a wide range of countries, to convey a distinctly nocturnal sense of the city’s criminal and cultural underworlds.

Recognition of this music as a distinct genre would come two or three decades later, as it came to be cherished, imitated and parodied for its capacity to suggest moody nocturnal atmospheres. In the late 1990s, original and new recordings of this music would be gathered in compact disc compilations and branded as “Crime Jazz,” one subgenre within the broader categories of postwar “lounge” and “easy listening” music which found new audiences during this period.

Criticism of “crime jazz,” has focused on the “functionalism” of the music, its capacity to quickly evoke moods of menace or erotic promise as atmospheric backdrops for stories of the lurid night-time city. This functionalism is sometimes condemned as the degradation of a musical form (post-World War

II jazz) which had struggled to attain cultural prestige for its formal qualities. (See, for discussion of these issues, Holbrook, 2008 and “cgilde,” 2015.) While there are other reasons for regarding jazz as “night music” – in particular, the centrality of night-time performance in its development – the sense that jazz was the appropriate musical backdrop to narratives of nocturnal criminality could not help but be seen as trivializing the form, reducing it to a tool of emotional manipulation.

A more recent way of thinking about musical nocturnes assigns to music the task of offering refuge from the often-violent realities of the social, urban night. Recent writing on the relationship between music and care has focused on musical forms believed to nurture the intimacy and human connection which are often believed to reach their fullest levels of achievement at night. As Caroline Ardrey has noted, the musical nocturne is often noted for its “ethereal and hallucinatory qualities” (Ardrey, 2019: 101), for the light and dreamy sensations which it is able to instill. While these same qualities were one reason for the genre’s dismissal in the 19th century, they have found more positive reception in recent writing concerned with situations of intimacy and solidarity. Writing from within the emergent interdisciplinary field of “Peacebuilding Studies,” Lauren Levesque examines the role of the lullaby – a quintessentially nocturnal form of music – in establishing profound connections between people at the thresholds between day and night, wakefulness and sleep.

The slow attunement between minds and bodies which unfolds over the course of a lullaby, Levesque writes, might serve as a model for other modes of engagement between human subjects, including those which unfold within community-based forms of social activism (Levesque 2022: 228). To sing a lullaby to another is to place both singer and listener within an affective relationship marked by the transition from one state (wakefulness) to another (sleep) within a relationship marked by care and sharing. In French, where the etymologi-

cal closeness of “berceau” (cradle) to “berceuse (lullaby) is clear, the gentle, rocking movement of the former finds expression in the musical rhythms of the latter. In a short encyclopedia entry on the “Berceau” (cradle), Fritz Nies reminds us that, in the genre’s French traditions, the lyrics of lullabies make reference to all of the other beings (family members and barnyard animals) who have already gone to sleep and whose collective slumber the listener of the lullaby is now invited to join (Nies, 2013). As one form of the musical nocturne, the lullaby is not simply a functional means of inducing sleep, nor simply a musical representation of the dream-like state which it anticipates. Rather, as a rhythmic form which imagines the participation of others, it structures a distinctly nocturnal context of care and solidarity.

Music’s relationship to the night has also been conceptualized in relation to the broader role of sound within nocturnal experience. Alain Montandon has shown how present-day scientific research confirms the claim, traceable to the writings of Aristotle and his contemporaries, that sound travels more easily at night, when temperatures are usually lower. Building on these ideas, Montandon suggests that the coming of night involves a reordering of the hierarchy of senses within human experience. The night is characterized by “the passage from sight to hearing, from the eye to the ear, and it is indeed the night that draws one sense towards the other, from light to darkness, as if light were only there to make darkness possible, and darkness only to make sound flourish” (Montandon, 2021: 23; translation by the author). In his book *La terre et les rêveries du repos*, the philosopher Gaston Bachelard suggested that, in the night, hearing replaces seeing as the primary sense (Bachelard, 1948: 168).

The argument that sound assumes new importance with the coming of night - when visibility is reduced and sound travels more effectively - is central to Charlotte Berkery’s analysis of what she calls “literary night scenes” in novels of the French Second Empire (1852-1870) (Berkery, 2024: 40). In these works,

with the coming of night, narration shifts from an enumeration of sights to one of sounds, and novelistic characters are described in terms of the listening in which they now engage. The sonic dimensions of the nocturnal city invite, on the part of those who move in the night, an activity of “déchiffrement” by which sounds are judged in terms of the potential dangers or places of refuge which they reveal (Berkery, 2024: 40).

Neither Montandon nor Berkery is talking specifically about music, but others will note the ways in which musical sounds might orient the movement of those travelling within the night. Places of nocturnal social gathering, whether attractive or repellent, are identified at a distance through the sounds, very often musical in origin, which emanate from them. Bottà and Stahl, in the introduction to their edited volume *Nocturnes: Popular Music and the Night*, suggest that “it is the dark where hearing becomes the primary sense informing us of predator and prey, friend and foe, safety and danger; and it can be music that guides us towards one or the other” (Bottà and Stahl, 2019: 5).

PAINTING, PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE HISTORICAL NIGHT

While the musical nocturne of the nineteenth century found easy acceptance as a genre, it is in relation to the art of painting that the most elaborate attempts to conceptualize the nocturne as a genre may be found. Early critical writing about the painted nocturne, however, is more fragmentary, initially concerned more with the work of individual artists (such as James McNeill Whistler) than with theorizing the genre more broadly. A more extensive scholarly engagement with the painterly nocturne has come in the last four decades, in landmark works such by those by Choné 1992), Saint Girons (2006), and Valance (2015). More recently still, interest in the nocturne within the visual arts may be found within more broadly-based investigations into questions of darkness and vision, such as those of Didier-Huberman (2023), Adam Elcott (2016), Marine Kisiel and Matthieu Léglise (2023).

The recent wave of scholarship on the nocturne in painting has some of its roots in the so-called “spatial turn” (Guldi, 2010) which significantly reshaped the study of painting, literature and cinema in the 1990s and early 2000s. Within this turn, one finds a rise of interest in the culture of cities and in representations of urban life. Significant works on the painterly nocturne since the 1990s have focused on artistic renderings of nineteenth century Paris and other European or North American cities. In *L’Atelier des nuits* (1992), Paulette Choné ties the development of the nocturne to changes in the technologies used to illuminate urban spaces. The longstanding interest of art historians in light and shadow, typically analyzed in terms of a history of artistic schools and styles, is here reimagined in relation to a sequence of technological inventions altering the illumination of the social world. These inventions, most notably that of electricity, alter the conditions under which the night will be imagined. In the nineteenth century, Choné writes,

the generalization of public lighting, the substitution of electric lighting for combustion lighting, have so profoundly modified our perceptual and poetic universe that the constants, the famous “archetypes” of the phantasmatic night have been completely overturned (Choné, 1992: 33).

More is being claimed here than that artistic representations register a changing external reality. If the night is one possible referent or artistic theme among others it is also a field of sensory perceptions whose constituent features (light and darkness) are central to the very practice of painting. Still, rather than simply reproducing these changes, the painted nocturne of the nineteenth century drew on other shifts in the aesthetic imperatives presiding over the visual arts in the West. As Philippe Sounier has argued, the emergence of the nocturne in painting was authorized by an earlier acceptance of landscape as a legitimate artistic object – an acceptance that was itself the outcome of aesthetic debates and experiments extending back over centuries: “For the night to become a subject in its own right, as it would

be in an emblematic way under the brush of the American painter James McNeill Whistler and his followers, required that the old hierarchy of genres on which the entire classical edifice was based lose its effectiveness and that the landscape impose itself in the hearts of the public.” (Sounier, 2020: 169; translation by the author).

For Hélène Valance, in a major study of the nocturne in nineteenth century American art, it is not enough that artists and their publics accept the legitimacy of landscape as a subject; the development of the nocturne in painting required, as well, that the city assume a new legitimacy as artistic subject. Valance further suggests that, by focussing on the night of cities, in the midst of major social, architectural and technological changes in the character of urban life, painting could not help but acknowledge that the night was a historical phenomenon: “In the late nineteenth century, night, one of the rare phenomena of human experience that seemed truly universal and immutable, entered history” (Valance, 2018: 9.) This entry into history was marked by painting’s registering of new technologies of light, as mentioned, but these technologies themselves were bound up with other phenomena, like the spectacle of human populations out in city streets, and the new forms of visual culture (clothing, advertisements, buildings) which now distinguished urban landscapes. The painterly nocturne of the nineteenth century, then, possessed an aesthetic and evidentiary “thickness” because of the wide variety of sensory, social and infrastructural features it was expected to capture.

A more elaborate set of arguments about the painted nocturne, advanced by Valance and others, is that the impulse to represent the night contributed to the growth of abstraction as an artistic strategy. Insofar as the experience of night-time darkness is one of reduced visibility, and inasmuch as technologies of nighttime lighting may confuse vision (through their reverberating effects and intermittent presence), the painterly nocturne both registered and itself reproduced a crisis of vision. Valance writes:

In the landscape of the city night, the human presence became difficult to make out, opaque both literary and symbolically. As a result of the darkness, the human form became abstract. For the artists who represented the urban night, the indistinguishable presence emerged in two recurrent figures: the crowd and the shadow, both of which embodied a kind of deterioration of individual identity, or at least a shift to a problematic appearance (Valance, 2018: 169).

The "problematic appearance" of human figures in the urban nocturnes of late nineteenth century helped to facilitate several transitions in the visual arts. The blurred figures of city scenes at night might capture the "real" experience of being out in the nighttime city, but such figures also furthered the movement of painters towards abstraction, in this case through a turn towards impressionistic views in which the clarity of detail was sacrificed in the name of visual effects.

For Choné and Valance, the ubiquity of illumination, of street lighting and illuminated advertisements, rendered the night of nineteenth century cities a historical (rather than eternal) phenomenon. For many of those writing about photography and cinema, the challenges posed by the night were more practical. We may follow Diane Poitras in noting that, inasmuch as the cinema requires the impression of light upon a sensitive surface, cinematic – and, presumably, photographic – representations of the night pose a challenge. Photographic media confront "the paradox of lighting up the night to get an image, while preserving a sense of darkness" (Poitras, 2014: 12). Artistically ambitious photographers of the early twentieth century, as Ruth Hommelen has suggested, often sought to escape the ubiquitous presence of electric lighting, which had so enchanted painters of the previous century, by shooting images of "quiet streets and alleyways, resisting the celebratory treatment of neon and busy streets" (Hommelen, 2015:394). This evasion of the obvious signifiers of urban modernity made such photographs seem antiquated. However, like other forms of urban photography, which focused on nocturnal images of dilapidated

ruins or criminal hangouts, such imagery could claim an artistic seriousness through its apparent avoidance of the facile visual beauty of neon-lights and festive city streets.

CINEMATIC NOCTURNES

In ways which are just beginning to be studied, the cinema belongs to a history of energy; its existence has been shaped by forces which have determined the availability of electricity and illumination. The scholarship of Sheri Chinen Biesen on filmmaking in Hollywood during World War II suggests that war-time restrictions on energy use played a role in the emergence of a shadowy *film noir* aesthetic in the early 1940s – not simply through the requirement to use less lighting, but because restrictions on the use of other materials forced studios to recycle sets, whose reuse might be disguised by weak, shadowy illumination (Biesen, 2005: 71). Biesen resists building a purely deterministic relationship between restrictions on the use of electricity during this period and the emergence of style in which the night was central. Nevertheless, just as painted nocturnes of the nineteenth century registered changes in the illumination of cities, we can see each moment in film history as registering the character and availability of technologies of illumination.

As Judith Langendorff notes, in one of the major scholarly works on the cinematic nocturne, the nocturne is usually a property of certain sequences in films rather than of a film as a whole (Langendorff, 2021: 46). This is almost certainly an effect of the demands of narrative story-telling, which only rarely accommodate fictions which transpire exclusively in the night. The purest forms of the cinematic nocturne, then, are to be found in short avant-garde films, often of only a few minutes duration⁴. Nevertheless, the history of cinema includes several hundred exam-

⁴ See, among a very large number of possible examples, *Night Scene New York* (2009, USA, dir. Jem Cohen), *Luz Nocturna* (2022, Costa Rica, dir. Kim Torres), *Nightrain* (2023, Germany, dir. Friedhelm Kapteina), *Notturmo* (2009, Italy, dir. Mauro Santini).

ples of what I have elsewhere called “single-night narratives,” films whose stories are contained within a single night (Straw, 2015). In such films, typically, the night becomes the time of a spatial journey (very often through a city at night) or maps a shift in relationships between people confined to a space, such as a nightclub, over the course of one night. Single-night films, despite their many variations, may be viewed as versions of a cinematic nocturne to the extent that, rather than simply using the premise of a single night as a convenient narrative frame (or gimmick), they construct the night as a coherent world with its own ways of ordering human relationships and social complexity. The night, within such films, is often a laboratory in which, between darkness and dawn, narratives work out the conditions under which human solidarities might take shape or individuals might come to self-knowledge.

Discussions of the night in cinema, as in other forms, vary according to the extent to which they imagine the night as light or heavy, thin or thick. Langendorff recalls Gerard Genette’s discussion of the semantics of the words “jour” and “nuit” in French, with “jour” resonating (if not rhyming) with “lourd” (heavy) and “nuit” with “luire” (to shine) (quoted in Langendorff, 2021: 18). We have seen how the night, in discussions of the musical nocturne, is often perceived as thin and weightless, transporting listeners from one moment of reverie to another. In the cinema, Marion Froger has suggested, the night, in its relative stillness, might offer a more effective cinematic backdrop than the day for lengthy scenes of quiet and discrete intimacy between characters (Froger, 2019: 206). Others, in contrast, will insist on the thick force of the night in cinema, on the capacity of darkness “to make forms disappear, to erase them from space, to devour them” (Renard, 1999/2000: 49.)

BODIES AND BUILDINGS IN THE NIGHT

Some of the complexity of the concept of the cultural “nocturne” is highlighted when we move from the well-established artistic genres of painting, music or cinema to consider forms

of human performance or vestimentary adornment. It is easy to enumerate some of the ways in which people act or dress themselves differently in the night (as they do for work, religious ceremonies or any number of situations.) Might we go further and identify forms of human self-presentation which express (rather than simply adapt to) real or imagined features of the night?

In his book-length study of blues music clubs in Chicago, sociologist David Grazian develops the notion of a “nocturnal self,” as follows: “I have coined the term nocturnal self to describe the personalities that pleasure-seekers craft as they negotiate their way through the nightlife of the city. In urbane restaurants, cocktail bars, and dance clubs, late-night revelers frequently engage in a kind of temporary role-playing by fashioning themselves as sexy divas and drink-swilling hipsters to contrast the regularity of their everyday lives, if only for a few hours at a time” (Grazian, 2003: 63; see also Ocejo, 2014.) Grazian’s ideas bear affinities with any number of sociological currents which focus on the dramaturgical dimensions of urban life, describing the prescribed roles and performative rituals to which people acquiesce. To believe that the performance of a “nocturnal self” bears some relationship to the artistic nocturnes found in fields like poetry or painting, however, we would need to believe that this kind of self is necessarily expressive of properties of the night (and not simply an identity people adopt so as to function within it.)

One avenue for investigating these questions might be found in artistic forms which involve the human body and its presentation. In much of her work, but most notably in the series to which she has given the title “Nocturnes,” the contemporary American artist Karen LaMonte has produced sculptures replicating forms of night-time dress which suggest (but do not include) the female bodies which might wear them. “Inspired by the beauty of night,” LaMonte writes, “I call these sculptures Nocturnes—dark, seductive, and sublime. They

are absent female forms rising from penumbral garments as figurations of dusk” (LaMonte, 2025). At the simplest level, we may see LaMonte as giving us a sculptural version of the nocturne, to sit alongside the poetic, musical, photographic and other varieties we have been examining. Hope Adams, writing on LaMonte’s *Nocturnes* series, will go further, suggesting that the women on whom these sculptures are modelled themselves express features of the night: “From mythology to music, female figures serve as representations of the stars, the moon, and the night” insofar as they are often interpreted as “dark, seductive, and sublime” (Adams, 2024: 224). For the fashion theorist Marie Schiele, the human figure enveloped in swirling fabric, who is typically (in the history of art and contemporary fashion photography) a woman, likewise expresses a fundamental “nightness.” The coat which envelopes the human figure is like the night because the latter “is without exit, without edges, or limits, and in this sense, it is infinite because it shatters the boundaries between the individual and what surrounds her, as well as her perceptual habits” (Schiele, 2023 : 113). In both these examples, the night itself is seen as already gendered, and the artistic fields of sculpture and fashion find their version of the nocturne in practices which express the gendered night in material form.

Another terrain on which qualities of the night might be expressed in material form is that of the built environment. It has become common in recent years to note that, in the long history of architecture, little consideration has been given to the night. In 2024, contributors to a special issue of the journal *Column*, devoted to “A Nocturnal History of Architecture,” traced the history of a field and profession in which daytime had long been imagined as the natural state in which buildings might be used or understood. Across the whole heritage of humanist architecture, as Sebastien Grosset describes it, the objective was to replace “the magic of the hearth with the brightness of everyday, eventually reaching the full transparency of glass architecture” (Grosset, 2024: 9). To be sure,

buildings were designed with consideration of their night-time uses, but it is difficult, in architectural history, to identify versions of an “architectural nocturne,” of projects which would express, in their very form, the attributes of the night.

While the term “nocturnal architecture” circulates widely today in blogs and architectural textbooks (e.g., “Anonymous,” 2024), it refers almost exclusively to the exterior illuminations which determine a building’s place within lighted cityscapes. For more profound versions of the “architectural nocturne,” concerned with the inside of buildings and their uses, we may look to recent writing on nightclubs and other sites of underground culture. Here we find tentative moves to assert an expressive relationship between forms of the built environment and characteristics of the night. In their book-length proposal for an Institute for Night Culture in Amsterdam, various authors write of the ways in which the different spaces in an ideal nightclub (dancefloors, lounges, bar areas, etc.) will embody principles emblematic of nightlife, such as its interconnectedness and its balancing of intimacy and public spectacle (Multer Van der Vegt and Petermann, 2024: 33, 65). Like the night itself, the ideal nightclub will allow for the passage between different kinds of activity and include spaces permitting both intimate interpersonal contact and collective festivity. Cat Rossi develops some of these ideas further, suggesting isomorphic relationships between the rhythmic character of festive nights and the structural intervals built into the physical design of nightclub spaces: “Rhythm is embedded in nightclub architecture: in its music most obviously, but also in lighting effects of different durations and intensities, in interiors designed to be experienced for delineated periods of time, at spaces intervals, and different tempos, with demarcated spaces for dancing, relaxing or observing, as well as more licentious activities” (Rossi, 2024: 114)”

Many of these ideas go beyond the prescriptive, technical argument that an effective night-time space (like a dance club) should be structured to accommodate the sorts of activities

which will transpire within it. If rhythm, interconnection and multi-scaled forms of human sociability are understood as defining features of the night, then certain kinds of building may be seen to express a certain experience of the night rather than simply support it.

NIGHT AND THE KNOWABILITY OF THE WORLD

Reading through the corpus of writings devoted to the artistic nocturne in different fields, it would appear that a key source of disagreement concerns the extent to which the night (as a theme, setting or atmosphere) enhances or diminishes the knowability of the world. One of Hélène Vance's important observations concerning the nineteenth century nocturne in painting was that the details of the human figure were lost within images, subject to distortion and criss-crossing forms of illumination. An unintended effect of this blurring of vision, Valance suggests, was the racial indeterminacy of the human figures who were seen, in paintings, to be occupying public space in cities: "Placed in the service of an equivocal game of contrasts and erasures, it [the nocturne] absorbed the Other into the night. The art of darkness was supposed to epitomize the superiority of white civilization. And yet, though it adopted the simplified oppositions of popular culture, it revealed as well the fragility of the clichés, by suggesting possible inversions and the blurring of boundaries" (Valance, 2018: 207.)

The nocturne, then, inspires representations which obscure certain markers of social division (like racialized appearance). This is not the same, of course, as saying that such markers have no real existence or social effects, but this indeterminacy might encourage an acceptance of the night as occupied by a multiplicity of identities and populations. As the Mexican cultural critic Carlos Monsivais once claimed, the night is "the sanctuary of liberties and mythological scenarios," marked by the opening up of possibilities and systems of belief (Salazar, 2006 : 88; translation by the author.) Other

writing on artistic engagements with the night will take these ideas further. In an analysis of what the author calls “Latina/o aesthetics of night” in poetry, Maria DeGuzman builds to the assertion that, in the indecipherability of so many night-time images, an aesthetic reordering of the world is possible: “Night,” DeGuzman writes, “is a trope that is often anti-figural. It cannot be contained by figuration. It exceeds it. Instead, it devours or incorporates figuration. Thus, as a form of hauntology, night—and a queer tropics of night—reverses power dynamics between the living and the dead, the dominant and the marginal, the center and the periphery, the visible and the invisible (DeGuzman, 2014: 79.) The blurry indecipherability of so many images of the night, then (in painting, cinema and poetry), challenges a figural order in which things and people are in their prescribed places, or in which distinctions between the known and the unknowable are policed.

A recent engagement with these questions, developed in relation to contemporary cinema, notes how the night has become a privileged setting for what Iggy Cortez calls “the nocturnal as spatial environment with multiple political functions” (2023: 213). Among the many varieties of present-day cinema’s engagements with the night, the most powerful, perhaps, is the use of night and darkness to locate and frame the political traumas of the present-day world. Cortez discusses a number of films in which the night, in his words, “offers a veil of darkness for forced migration, hosts occluded forms of labour that maintain the nation’s infrastructure and diurnal flows, and enables queer or wayward intimacies that are often deemed impermissible under the scrutiny of legal norms and regulations” (213). It is not simply that films show these phenomena as occurring in darkness – though they might well – but that cinema’s presentation of them as phenomena of the night forces us to confront the question of their visibility and perceptibility as a political condition. (For another discussion of the “nocturnalization” of politics in recent cinema, see Straw, 2025.) Recent developments in art history have developed

similar ideas. Reflections on darkness and obscurity as characteristic of certain kinds of political knowledge or responses to socially-based trauma have been taken up at length in the work of Didier-Huberman (2023), Adam Elcott (2016), Marine Kisiel and Matthieu Légise (2023).

AN URBAN NOCTURNE?

Ideas about the nocturne have proliferated and thickened in recent studies of individual artistic media. And yet, it might be said, there is still an absence of any unified model of the nocturne which would tie together these different, media-specific understandings. If such a model is to come, it is likely because the emerging academic field of “night studies” (Straw, 2020) has provided a space of interdisciplinary dialogue in which very different traditions of thinking about the night are considered in relationship to each other. Within night studies, sociological notions of a “nighttime personality” are made to resonate with art-historical ideas about the visibility of human figures in darkened environments. Claims about the anti-figural character of nocturnal imagery, in cinema and other visual media, are reworked in municipal projects to redesign lighting systems in cities. Theoretically-grounded arguments claiming that music is the artistic form most expressive of the night find themselves referenced within public policy documents calling for the protect of night-time musical venues.

As different artistic fields work to invent their own versions of a nocturne – offering up clusters of style, form and theme which would express a sense of “nightness” – cities and other environments are busy filling the night with art and culture to an unprecedented extent. *Nuits blanches* – all-nights events devoted to the exhibition of art works throughout a city, typically held once a year – have proliferated across the world since the turn of the millennium (Evans, 2011). During the same period, night-time events in museums and galleries (so-called “lates”) have become a standard part of the weekly or

monthly schedules of cultural institutions (Stockman, 2018). While the works presented in “nuits blanches” or “museum nights” will not necessarily deal with the night in an explicitly thematic or aesthetic sense, these events nevertheless seek to immerse art in contexts of festive sociability believed to be characteristic of nighttime. Cities themselves, it might be suggested, are producing their own “nocturnes” - ways of being and feeling, clusters of activity and sensory atmospheres - in which beliefs about the character of the night are expressed.

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