

Imagine the urban Night

In Gwiazdzinski Luc, 2016, *La nuit, dernière frontière de la ville*,
Paris, Rhuthmos, pp.7-10

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When I was five and six years old, my family lived, for a brief period, in a northern community in the Canadian province of Manitoba. During these formative years, I was marked profoundly by two experiences of the night. Both of these, I learned later, were the result of anomalies in the ways in which electromagnetic forces operate in northern regions of the globe. One of these experiences was the spectacle of the Aurora Borealis, the so-called Northern Lights, which regularly turned the northern nocturnal sky into a kaleidoscope of multi-coloured and shifting shapes. It was common, on a winter night, to leave the house and stand outside in the cold, watching for long periods of time as the lights flickered and rearranged themselves. The visual effects were all the more striking because of the small populations of northern communities, which ensured that interference from terrestrial illumination was negligible.

The other formative experience was a result of the ways in which radio broadcasting signals travel through the atmosphere of the northern night. Radio signals, as is well known, are typically stronger at night in all regions of the globe. In the north, however, this effect is magnified: the curving of the earth's atmosphere allowed us to receive radio stations from deep in the American south. Living far from the border with the United States, we nevertheless spent our evenings listening to the fiery speeches of southern evangelical preachers, or to those dramatized radio programs of an earlier age (like Superman) which lingered on American commercial radio. Because they spoke of contexts distant (in geographical and cultural terms) from those in which we lived, these programs made the night a time of alien encounters and occasional bursts of terror. (Indeed, the night-time invasion of Canadian skies by radio signals from the United States is often given as a key reason for the launch of public broadcasting in Canada, in the 1930s.)

Some of my earliest memories, then, are of nocturnal experiences which were both natural and profoundly cultural. If these experiences were not, in any respect, urban in character, they nevertheless presided over my subsequent transformation into a confirmed city-dweller, fascinated by the enchanting capacities of the night and by its capacity to re-order social and cultural relations. Years later, as I passed through university, writing a *mémoire de maîtrise* on the American *film noir* and a doctoral thesis on popular dance music of the period 1975-1985, I pursued a fascination with the night without recognizing it as such.

As a researcher, my assimilation into a field which we can now, with confidence, call “night studies”, has been marked by two encounters. The first of these came on a visit to Manchester, in 1994, to deliver a conference with the title “Montreal, Music and Moral Geography.” While I remember little of what I said, I preserve the sharp memory of being given, on my departure, a photocopied document, the size of a large book, with the title *The 24-Hour City : Selected Papers from the First National Conference on the Night-time Economy*. Unfamiliar with notions like the “night-time economy”, I read the book with avid interest on the train to London.

The 24-Hour City brought together researchers, artists, night-time entrepreneurs, representatives of the Manchester police force and city administrators, to rethink the ways in which the urban night was measured, regulated and imagined. The night, it was argued here, was an urban resource to be valued rather than a set of problems to be controlled; it was a time of production and not simply a period in which hedonistic compensation would compensate for the labours of the day. Most importantly, in my view, the activities of the night -- in the realms of sexuality, lifestyle and cultural expression -- were to be seen as essential to a city's capacity to innovate and experiment. If these ideas seem deeply familiar to us today, this is largely an effect of their success. They wove their way into the vast array of urban culture initiatives which marked the Labour government of Tony Blair and were carried, in the suitcases of consultants, around the world in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

My second transformative encounter was with the book whose new edition you hold in your hands (or read on your screen.) On a trip to Paris in the mid 2000s, I purchased a copy of Luc Gwiazdzinski's *La nuit: dernière frontière de la ville*. On the first inside page of this book I find, written in pen, 7/2007, an indication of the month in which I finished reading it. On almost every page, I find the marks in pencil which instruct me to copy out those important passages which I wish to copy and preserve for further use.

In the years before reading this book, I had integrated discussion of the urban night within my teaching, drawing on the scattered materials available in English (many of them, like the works of Wolfgang Schivelbusch or Joachim Schlor, translated from the German.) Luc's book (sadly, as of yet, not translated into English) introduced me to the rich French vein of thinking on *les temporalités urbaines*, which set the concerns of the earlier Manchester event within a densely theorized account of the rhythms and cycles of urban life. I have spent much of the last decade acquainting myself with this body of thought and analysis, finding within it significant inspiration for my own work.

One of the great virtues of *La nuit : dernière frontière de la ville* is that it moves beyond a narrow focus on night-time entertainment and the habits of the urban night owl, to encompass the range of practices whose frequency and character change throughout the 24-hour cycle. We find, here, birth and death, eating and sleeping, work and leisure. While the festive, social night is present throughout, we are confronted, as well, with the tragic, solitary, even suicidal dimensions of night. This book is made rich by its attentiveness to the most minute of human practices and habits, all of them described and measured with meticulous accuracy. At a more conceptual level, Gwiazdzinski's notion of an urban citizenship which is discontinuous over the 24-hour cycle has proven a highly productive idea, for my students as for myself. Here, as elsewhere in the book, we find a concern for social justice often absent from those accounts of the night which reduce its political dimensions to the simple conflict between nocturnal pleasures and those forces which seek to control them.

I have been privileged to count Luc Gwiazdzinski as a friend and collaborator since 2014, when we took part in the drafting of a Manifeste de Nuit, as guests of the Colaboratorio group in Sao Paulo, Brazil. As I write these words, the English capital of London is seeking to appoint a "Night Czar", while my own city, Montreal, contemplates the adoption of a "Charte de la vie nocturne". These initiatives, nourished in transnational dialogue and in the exchange of ideas

across linguistic barriers, are one sign of the rich wave of thinking that now surrounds the urban night. This book, the fruit of sustained reflection and analysis, is a key contribution to this thinking.

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