

**The darkness in which things may find refuge;
The darkness in which to imagine other worlds;
The darkness in which life and love find new possibilities, un-
dercover and out of sight;
From within the abandoned and the derelict;
The hidden sphere of the vacant, and the ghostly remains;
The darkness of a shared listening;
This sound that is an invisible matter;
That is mine and yours;
Never one or the other, but both –
This sound, a space between;
That is restless, and that flees, this sound;
From me to you to this and to what is behind and under;
This sound that is more than human, and that comes to life in
the dark;
This sound, like all sounds, an assemblage;
With what is close and the different;
With the difference that I am always already – a body of more
than one;
This sound;
And which makes it possible to speak.**











The Night – notes on the nocturnal logic

Brandon LaBelle

I want to focus on the topic of the night as an arena or condition connected to the depths of the unconscious and of the creative imagination. In following the night, and its various cultural and social dynamics, its perceptual and existential orientation, I'm led to the notion of a "nocturnal logic": the night, in troubling the demarcations of the rational self and normative constructs of social ordering, requires a particular discourse, one to the side of madness, delirium, poetics and magic. I want to suggest that the night is a particular arena and conceptual framework that inspires or conjures unique forms of perception, social behavior, cultural practices and knowledge. What happens to our senses during the night? How does the world appear when it turns dark? Does not the night require another type of orientation as well as representation?

I would propose that the night conditions our perception to orient us differently, forcing us into another temporal and spatial experience. When sunlight disappears we enter a zone of ambiguity; the relation between form and shadow shifts to one of exaggeration – everything hovers in a state of indistinguishability; background and foreground become less distinct, bodies seem to appear suddenly, out of nowhere, and then disappear again; our sensorial understandings shift – we must look to be sure we're not being followed; we also adopt another form of self-presentation – we may dress up, or dress down; the night additionally requires another way of approaching others: conversations change, identities bend – we can't be sure who someone is, or what they may become at nighttime.

The night, in a sense, is not to be trusted.

Subsequently, the night is a partner to the ghostly and the unnamable; we hide in the night, lose ourselves, or search for intensities of freedom; we may grow afraid, anxious or we may become excited, anticipating another type of exchange. The night, in short, acts as an arena for the emergence of an altered subjectivity, one often close to expressions of loneliness, the erotic, criminality as well as the creative imagination.

Monsters

We can appreciate the particular qualities of the nocturnal by considering the relation between the night and monsters. For example, vampires, werewolves, boogymen, and even witches, all emerge at night; the night often induces the very conditions of monstrosity. The monster, in fact, comes to represent the night as a time of fear, ambiguity, danger and altered identity. With the appearance of the monster the night easily slips into nightmare, which troubles rational thought.

Even Freud, in his *Interpretation of Dreams*, was unable to include the nightmare within his theory of dreams – defined as "wish fulfillment"; the nightmare, in other words, poses a problem, for what forms of wish fulfillment might the nightmare represent? This is also suggested in the work of Gaston Bachelard and his theories of poetics and daydreaming, which he contrasts to night dreams. For Bachelard, the night dream troubles our sleep, as well as lyrical poetics with a certain depth, and even madness, unsettling language and its poetical directives. Yet, I'd pose night dreams and nightmares as not so much leading away from poetics, but rather giving way to creative forms I might term "anguished" – a poetics not of lyrical becoming, but rather of suffering, trauma, euphoria and delirium.

It would seem the night leads away from the reasonable and the rational, troubling even poetics; and yet, the night has its features, its qualities, however anguished or suffering. How to describe and unpack the logic of the night? What types of practices can be considered by way of

nocturnal occurrence and behavior? I suggest that the night leads us toward what we might call “the black arts”: the formation of practices shaped by the night and the knowledges that emerge and give way to nocturnal logics.

Monsters and nightmares occupy and even manifest the night, giving body to an anguished poetics – they are night-forms, night-constructions and even guides into the logic of the nocturnal. Here we may appreciate the deeper relationship between the night and the unconscious; that which is disruptive of language and reasonable discourse, and that troubles not only our sleep, but also the process of interpretation: the inability to perceive clearly, to apprehend or comprehend all that lurks in the depths and that at times gives way to the emergence of a haunted form: the monster as a figuration of the black arts.

The cultural theorist Jeffrey Cohen gives a hint of this when he writes: “In its function as dialectical Other or third-term supplement, the monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond – of all those loci that are rhetorically placed as distant but originate Within”. The monster is closer than we might imagine; in fact, it is too close, pointing not so much to an external entity, but to the desires and fears within: the depths of what we cannot speak of and yet which drives us. The monster can be glimpsed as one’s own double finding shape in moments of anxiety and delirium, and within the shadowy ambiguities of the nocturnal. In this regard, the night holds a special place within the imagination – in fact, it might be the depths of the imaginary itself; whether in the form of nightmares or as an appeal to radical freedom, the night is a platform of creative transformation. It is an arena for the externalization of the unconscious. Maybe what transforms a body into a monster is the same type of possibility that may support the creative process, a thinking and being otherwise, and the materialization of unwanted form?

Coincidentally, the night is often the time for culture in general: the time for events, for concerts, for club-going; it is the essential moment of experimentation: to dress up, to experience other encounters, to party or let loose, and to attend to the production of staged culture, which is always informed by the inherent drive of the imaginary. The night additionally has its own architectural language in the form of the night club: already we see an expression not of the daydream, but of the haunted, the disoriented and the (im)possible – these night-spaces full of dizzying lights and deep rhythms, and that announce the relation between monsters and the erotic, reminding how close fear and desire are: the desires that may manifest in night-time events can also become monstrous, all-consuming or threatening; the dance floor, for example, conducts the dissolution of the single body into a limitless expanse, a collective body formed in the instant of feverish loss (the exhausted and the drugged), which take their guidance from monstrosity.

Subjectivity at night is one of experimentation; panicked or sexed, monstrous, erotic, lonely and also haunted by thought, deep reflection, by the anguished poem, which is always close to madness. While the project of the Enlightenment may base itself upon a notion of the illuminated, and the shining forth of a full apprehension of the world, the night instead delivers another type of truth – the truth of the deep body, of unwanted desire, hallucination and uncanny formations, and of the creative drive. I might say, that artworks are types of monsters: they are forms emerging out of the formless, and they keep in dialogue with the unnamable as they enter into the cultural scene.

Dark light

I want to turn to a few artistic and cultural examples where we might consider the poetics of the night, and in particular, through the topic of shadow. The American artist Albert Pinkham Ryder, working in the 19th century, was particularly obsessed with painting night scenes and their shad-

owy intensities. His paintings, which later Modernists championed for their heavy use of paint and expressive abstraction, attempts to capture the night as a visual and sublime experience; and yet, in doing so, Ryder’s paintings edge close to a dizzying abstraction with swirls of black clouds hovering in a dim sky, or a grainy moonlight hovering above a turbulent sea. There is a visual and even haptic intensity to his paintings, specifically because they do not so much attempt to represent the night, but rather to recreate it – to conjure the nocturnal logic as it immerses us in its disorienting charge. At the same time, I think it is also Ryder’s rather existential character and subject matter that attracted many Modernist painters, in particular the expressionists; in this way, the night also comes to function as the condition of a certain existential angst: it is at night that the painter confronts the mysteries of being – the monsters of one’s own psyche taking shape according to the mesmerizing plasticity of paint.

The works of Ryder additionally refer us to the use of chiaroscuro – that method of sculpting on the canvas through deep contrasts between light and dark – and the method of tenebrism developed by Caravaggio in the 1600s, all of which attempt to give image to shadow. In the works of Caravaggio, as well as the Dutch painters Rembrandt and Gerrit van Honthorst, shadows act as the negative of form, yet a form that also starts to take over the pictorial plane. Shadows and darkness, the night and nocturnal logics, lead us to the edge of representation; in doing so, shadows come to indicate the depths of the formless: that which cannot be apprehended fully or circumscribed within the sphere of a public discourse.

Rembrandt’s candle-lit paintings are another example where the particular atmosphere of candlelight is put to great effect, often leading to scenes of isolation, wonder and solitude. Candlelight is a light especially made for the night; as Bachelard also examines in his wonderful book on the poetics of the candle, candlelight is essentially a light of solitude; it is the poet’s light, he suggests.

Solitude and loneliness, the nocturnal quiet in which shadows envelope us in their secrets, these are paralleled by how candlelight is deeply aligned with the erotic – candlelight may imbue shadow with erotic promise, announcing the night and all forms of darkness as a place of sexual encounter or fantasy. Candles set the mood by highlighting shadows, setting them into motion – the gentle dance – which, as Roland Barthes expresses, punctuates the erotic imagination. His own account of being drawn to the small cavity of shadow appearing just inside the shirt sleeve of a friend sitting across from him is an example of how shadows, and the play of form and formlessness, excite the erotic (and creative) imagination.

One final example in which the night and shadows appear dramatically can be found in the cinematic expressions of Film Noir. Film Noir, or “black film”, emerged in the 1940s in the US and is characterized by a rather gritty use of low-lighting, which creates intense shadows and deep contrasts. This visual quality is strikingly expressive, locating us in a space of uncertainty and haunting narrative. This is mirrored in the subject matter, which often focuses on melodrama, sexual innuendo and criminal behavior: a narrative of black arts. Here we can easily see how the use of darkness comes to assist in telling dark narratives. The shadow is thus a condition of liminality; a zone of transition, of promise and of seduction, in which erotic life and haunted forms intermingle to continually unsettle the plays between right and wrong, pleasure and pain.

Magic of the state

Finally, I want to turn to the question of behavior and social life – from perceptions and poetics to expressions of exchange and interaction. As we’ve already seen, the night seems to inspire what we might call “illicit behaviors”: drunkenness, lasciviousness, prostitution, criminality, debauchery,

loneliness and despair, these are central motifs within narratives as well as expectations we have of the night; as with the monster, all sorts of creatures seem to crawl out at night, creating an altogether different social condition. Maybe this is why the night appeals to the imagination: not only does it change how we sense things, but it also produces an amazing set of unexpected encounters: the night is a time of drama based on the production of liminal subjectivities and their intermingling.

We might consider this in relation to questions of labor. The working day, as that time period of productivity, of attending school, visiting offices and institutions, and where we perform on a rational level – the structures of work demand productive behavior – these are deeply contrasted by the night; once work is done, we enter into another modality of conduct and contact. The night becomes an opportunity for having fun, for getting drunk, for experimentation and for escaping the reasonableness of production. We can understand how a notion of freedom is supported through the logic of the nocturnal: we are allowed, like a type of carnival, to partake in other modes of expression, often deeply connected to the erotic – the erotic as a force and form of libidinal drive: the thrust of the body as a desiring life-force. The night appeals to the inner drives, underscoring the nocturnal logic as one related to what I might call “the deep earth”: the tonalities and vibrations of magical force and the natural rhythm.

It is because of this that we might understand why the night is also deeply suspect; it is the time of criminals and secret missions. Robberies, rapes, muggings, killings, fights, smuggling operations and secret rendezvous’ find their ultimate opportunity at night; shadows immediately become a safe haven for enacting forms of misconduct, in support of irrational and socially disruptive actions.

The night is thus driven by inversion or perversion, of nightmare and anguished poetics, of erotic and criminal conduct, all of which contrasts sharply with the productive labors taking place during the day. Therefore, the night is also fully occupied by the police. The two meet and occur at the same moment, on the same street: the erotic force of bodies and the agents of control. Law and order are thus challenged by the conditions of the night and the logic of the nocturnal; liminal subjects, liminal knowledge, liminal relations shaped by violence and the unseen – these give challenge to the dictates of productive labor and rational ordering.

This can be understood by considering particular state systems. For instance, we can witness this by considering the case of Chile under the Pinochet dictatorship, which imposed a curfew by which nobody was allowed on the streets at night; in states of emergency, the night is strictly forbidden, harnessed by a systemic force of control. In response, this led to the formation of all night parties, at homes or in underground clubs, where people would gather knowing in advance they would have to spend the night and wait until morning before returning home. Night gatherings were thus situations of desperate freedom; a sort of lonely trap that fueled a culture of desperate measures, as well as marginal forms of being together. Within such a system, an artistic culture formed, often using performative methods and materials to address the embedded violence of the dictatorship. One such work by the artist Diamela Eltit gives us a stark expression; her *Zone of Pain* performance from 1980 consists of a series of actions performed on the street at night: first, the artist lacerates her arms, allowing the blood to drip down from her fingers and onto the pavement; second, she enters a nearby brothel, and reads sections of her writings to those gathered there – a text which speaks of the body and its capture; a sort of analytical dissection of the body in a state of arrest and brutality; finally, the artist returns to the street outside, and begins to wash clean the pavement. In Eltit’s work, we are given the body as a site, a surface that is vulnerable to the forces around it – to the violence of torture and disappearance by which the state operates; at the same time, this body is reclaimed through acts of self-abuse: Eltit takes possession of her own vulnerability, her flesh and blood, experiencing pain yet on her own terms and through her own logic. This logic, I would suggest, is one that negotiates the state through what Michael Taussig terms “magic” – the magic that passes

between a state apparatus and its citizens, and that may allow, through mysterious forms of agency and action, the superseding of systemic violence: resistances found in conducting spectral energies, fortifying the weak body and the weak community through engaging in the compounded languages and secret administrations structured by the dictatorship. Eltit’s is a “black art” passing through the logic of the nocturnal to enable the crafting of a monstrous formation that, in this case, attempts to interrupt state functionality and the production of lies.

The black arts

The night, in being aligned with the unconscious, in providing input into forms of emancipation, of thinking and doing otherwise, is a partner to the work of creative imagining and performance. Giving way to a nocturnal logic, the night may function as a temporal and spatial medium for forms of radical transformation, where formal arrangements and visible bodies are reoriented. This re-orientation may enable monstrous and magical formations, which, in giving us what we can only dream about, necessarily challenges constructs of the rational society. Accordingly, I would suggest that the particular expressivity of the night occludes the public sphere as the space of appearance; instead, it forces another system of organization, of appearing before and relating to each other. I might suggest, it is the condition for self-organization, for a type of anarchic modality of conduct, of gathering, of exchange and of publicness. For the night does have its own organizational principles found in the monstrous, the criminal, the erotic, and the poetics of the anguished; as we’ve seen, the night conducts the struggles and desires inherent to singular bodies in motion, particular bodies that, in the transformative conditions of the nocturnal, find possibility for becoming other: for confronting what haunts them – a dream, possibly, or the monstrous truth.

The night is always on the side of the suffering and therefore is never quite the space of open assembly, of deliberation and debate. Instead, it is a zone for the resistant, the lonely, the desperate, the lascivious and the outlawed. And for the construction of magic-formations, which may alter the conditions of rational thought toward those of escape, from reasonable discourse to states of madness, from the hospitable host to the unwelcomed stranger – figures of inversion and the uncommon, the delirious.

We might think of that instance of Dr. Jekyll transforming into Mr. Hyde on the nocturnal streets of London; such a performance literally embodies a dark challenge to rational science: under Jekyll’s mad theories of transfiguration, unspeakable knowledges are to be found. Here, I might conclude by posing “the black arts” as a body of resources for manifesting expressions of radical imagination, as well as for giving refuge to the unwanted and the deep earth (that earth outlawed by the capitalist logic of production).

The nocturnal logic performs as an extremely potent guide by which to imagine and incite possibilities; to be scared of the dark precisely because it contains apparitions of our own fantasies and urgencies, giving appearance to what we desire yet cannot fully articulate: the unnamable. The nocturnal logic, in this sense, both haunts and assists in imagining other realities, which forces into question the visible one in front of us.