

Rethinking Nightness: Philosophical Interpretations and Artistic Depictions of Night-Time Activities and Objects

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ABSTRACT. This paper examines night-time activities, objects, and experiences—such as nocturnal urban life, landscape, and atmospheres—and explores how these have been culturally perceived, philosophically interpreted, and artistically depicted. By identifying several elements of an aesthetics of the night, the paper aims to rethink the concepts of night and nightness. Although often neglected or discredited, they constitute significant domains of sensory experience that shape aesthetic life. The paper contributes to reconceptualizing (ordinary) aesthetic life by discussing the differences between daily and nightly aesthetic experiences, challenging uncritical oppositions between them, and questioning negative ontological associations traditionally attached to night and darkness. It also specifies key elements of an aesthetic framework for understanding the night.

1. Introduction

This paper develops the research agenda outlined in an earlier study presented at the ESA Conference 2024, which proposed the possibility of a new research field called “Everynight Aesthetics”, aimed at examining different ordinary nightly aesthetic activities, experiences, and objects that—although familiar—have received limited philosophical attention (Ratiu, 2024).

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Here, I address the topic of night and nightness by focusing on night-time activities, objects, and experiences, and by examining how these have been culturally perceived, practiced, and interpreted in philosophy, as well as represented in various arts—including painting, performances and installations. My scope remains primarily within Western modern and contemporary nocturnal practices, arts, and philosophical discourses.

This exploration aims to rethink night and nightness as integral yet overlooked or undervalued dimensions of aesthetic experience that shape aesthetic life. It contributes to a reconceptualization of ordinary aesthetic life by: (1) examining differences between nocturnal and diurnal cultural practices and experiences, while challenging conventional oppositions between night and day—darkness/light, rest/activity, dream/reality, invisibility/visibility, absence/presence, unrepresentable/representable; (2) questioning the association of night and darkness with negative ontological attributes, and showing that their ambivalent meanings depend on multiple historical, social, and cultural interpretations; (3) identifying several foundational elements of an aesthetics of the night.

2. Nocturnal Cultural Practices, Perceptions and Philosophical Interpretations

I begin by examining some of the wider nocturnal cultural practices, perceptions and philosophical interpretations of the night and its aesthetics, considering sensory dimensions and affective atmospheres in relation to natural night landscape (sky, stars, moon) and urban nightlife in the broad sense of ordinary nocturnal life (night work, leisure, entertainment).

Although the night is naturally associated with darkness, its sensory experience is far from universal. As Nick Dunn and Tim Edensor show in *Rethinking Darkness. Cultures, Histories, Practices* (2021), darkness consists of diverse characteristics, forms, and temporalities, generating varied experiences, engagements, sensual and affective affordances, and atmospheres, including multisensory ones. Understanding night and darkness therefore requires recognizing their “situated and plural nature”: conceptions of, and engagements with darkness vary widely across historical periods, cultures, and social contexts, even in Western spaces.²

² See Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, ‘Venturing into the dark: gloomy multiplicities’, pp. 9–15; Dunn and Edensor, 2021b, ‘Revisiting the dark: diverse encounters and experiences’, pp. 231–233.

To philosophically frame this diversity, I draw on several concepts from Jacques Rancière—particularly his analyses of the relationships between the aesthetic, art, the sensible and communal life in *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible* (2000/2013a), *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (2004/2009), and *Aisthesis. Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* (2011/2013b). In his view, the term “aesthetics” refers not only to “a specific regime for identifying and reflecting on the arts”, the modern “aesthetic regime”, as opposed to the “ethical” and “representative” regimes.³ It also refers, in a broader sense, to a form of the “distribution of the sensible” (*partage du sensible*) that “determines a mode of articulation between forms of action, production, perception, and thought.” (Rancière, 2013a, p. 86) This includes a “redistribution of the relations between the forms of sensory experience”, such as the visible and the invisible, the perceptible and the imperceptible, the audible and the inaudible, the speech and the silence or the noise. This second meaning shows the (paradoxical) links between the aesthetic paradigm and political community, referring both to forms of inclusion and of exclusion.⁴ Therefore, the term “sensible” itself “does not refer to what shows good sense or judgement but to what is *aisthēton* or capable of being apprehended by the senses”, that is, the “modes of visibility operative in the political domain” as well. (Rancière, 2009, pp. 7-8, 11, 14; Rancière, 2013a, pp. 4, 7–9, 39–42, 89; Rancière, 2013b, pp. ix, xii–xiv)

The insights on what might be called the production of the nocturnal “sensible” and the unequal distribution of light (“the visible”) and dark (“the invisible”), offered here and there by Rancière (2009, pp. 24–31; 2013a, p. 42), allow a new perspective on the nocturnal objects and activities. In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, chapter 6 ‘On Art and Work’, when he discusses “the way in which artists’ art found itself defined on the basis of a twofold promotion of work”, he identifies one type of promotion with “the struggles of the proletariat to bring labour out of the

3 See Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*, ‘Appendix I. Glossary of technical terms’: “The aesthetic regime abolishes the hierarchical distribution of the sensible characteristic of the representative regime of art, including the privilege of speech over visibility as well as the hierarchy of the arts, their subject matter, and their genres [...] The aesthetic regime also calls into question the very distinction between art and other activities.” (Rancière, 2013a, pp. 84–85)

4 See Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*: “I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it. A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts. This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution.” (Rancière, 2013a, p. 7)

night surrounding it, out of its exclusion from shared visibility and speech.”⁵ Although Rancière often associates “night” metaphorically with “exclusion” and opposes it to “visibility” and “speech”, his conceptual framework helps illuminate the experiencing of night and darkness and the production of their multiple meanings.

Through these lenses, night and darkness can be examined through a threefold perspective: 1. regimes of perception / invisibility; 2. regimes of experience and practice; 3. regimes of interpretation, since previous regimes are themselves produced and distributed according to particular values and emerge as “reconfigurations of experience”. These regimes interact to form the nocturnal sensible—what can be sensed, experienced, understood, or excluded in relation to the night. To paraphrase one of Rancière’s statements about art in *Aisthesis*, the night or darkness “is given to us through these transformations of the sensible fabric.”⁶

2.1. Night/Darkness as a Regime of Perception

Approaching *night* as a “regime of perception” (or “invisibility”) is a first possible angle of analysis. Night has long been associated with *dark/darkness* that challenges the visual capacity, and understood as “absence of light”. Historically, the endless successive rhythms of light and dark(ness) and the human inability to see clearly in darkness have structured the temporality of quotidian activities and created oppositions: night versus day, rest versus activity, dark(ness) versus light, dream versus reality, invisible versus visible, and so on.

These sensory and symbolic oppositions were often moralized in Western thought, reinforced by Judeo-Christian traditions, and associated with other positive and negative attributes. While day/light was related to truth, knowledge and good, night/darkness became linked with ignorance, danger, and evil—the Devil, sin, death, or heresy. (Dunn and Edensor 2021a, pp. 1–2)

⁵ Rancière, 2013a, p. 42, my emphasis; see also his book *La nuit des prolétaires: Archives du rêve ouvrier*, 1981, first translated in English as *The Nights of Labour: The Workers’ Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, 1989.

⁶ Rancière, 2013b, ‘Prelude’, p. xi. See also: “The conditions of this emergence [of art] cannot be deduced from a general concept of art or beauty founded on a global theory of man or the world, of the subject or being. Such concepts themselves depend upon a transformation of the forms of sensible experience, of ways of perceiving and being affected. They formulate a mode of intelligibility out of these reconfigurations of experience” (p. ix). This is why what he proposes to call the “aesthetic regime of art” is a “regime of perception, affection and thought” with its own logic. (Rancière, 2013b, pp. ix, xii)

Yet perceptions of darkness have been far from homogeneous. The *nocturnal* perception is not limited to visual perception. Darkness is not merely visual deprivation; it can enhance non-visual senses, producing multisensory or synesthetic experiences. As Michel Serres notes in *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, “the world is perceived differently after nightfall”, since immersion in darkness mobilizes sensory capacities neglected during daylight: sounds intensify, smells sharpen, touch becomes more exploratory, taste is enhanced, and even vision recalibrates.⁷

Moreover, the attributes of night, dark and darkness have shifted according to changing contexts across time and space, since their perception is mediated by cultural practices and values. (Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, p. 6) Although the dualistic opposition between day/light and night/darkness is common in Western cultures, there are also examples of positive spiritual meanings of night/darkness—depth, mystery, and adventure. For instance, Craig Koslofsky in *Evening’s Empire: A History of the Night in Early Modern Europe* (2011) draws attention to a different 16th and 17th century European mystical theology where darkness was valued instead as “conducive to mystery, profundity and beauty, signifying the ineffability and inexpressibility of God.”⁸ Likewise, other cultures—including Inuit, Indian, Polynesian, Native American, and African traditions—have attributed positive qualities to darkness, seeing it as conducive to sociability, ritual, creativity, or spiritual depth. As Guy Bordin shows in ‘Inuit’s perception of darkness. A singular feature’ (2021), in Inuit culture “darkness, despite the strong physical limits that it could impose on daily life (...), was a condition conducive to sociability, storytelling, play, rituals and festivity, qualities and understandings undermined by the advent of Christianity.”⁹

Thus, the perceptual regime of night is diverse and ambivalent, shaped by more than natural conditions. To understand the complexities of the aesthetics of night, a complementary perspective is needed.

2.2. Night/Darkness as a Regime of Experiences and Practices

⁷ Serres, *The Five Senses*, 2008, pp. 68–69; see also Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, p. 9–10.

⁸ Koslofsky, *Evening’s Empire: A History of the Night in Early Modern Europe*, 2011, quoted by Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, pp. 3–4, 6.

⁹ Bordin, ‘Inuit’s perception of darkness. A singular feature’, 2021, pp. 91–103; see also Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, pp. 3–4; Dunn and Edensor, 2021b, pp. 232–233.

Perceptual regimes of night and darkness must be considered alongside the material conditions and “the sensible fabric of experience” (in terms of Rancière, 2013b, p. x), including emotional and affective dimensions. This perspective is central for understanding modern night-time experience.

A first example is the nocturnal experience of *the natural landscape* or *the night sky* (*stars, moon*). Romantic portrayals of night emphasize emotional depth, sublimity, and mystery, against the negative representations of darkness prevalent before, when darkness has been associated with night-time real-life dangers in forests, mountains or other areas of wild nature. However, it is critical to recognize the highly ambivalent, contradictory sentiments that night and darkness still can provoke. (Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, p. 6) This ambivalence is related to dramatic changes in the “material conditions” of experiencing darkness: the ongoing expansion of illumination—initially by gas and later electric lighting—not only into cities, but also into hitherto unlit realms, such as rural areas or large areas of wild, uninhabited nature, radically reshaped human behavior after dark.

One significant contemporary reversal is the defense of darkness, especially the dark night sky with visible stars, as a valuable natural and cultural resource. Nocturnal tourism—such as stargazing by “celestial tourists”—re-conceptualizes darkness as aesthetically, scientifically, and spiritually meaningful. Two studies in *Urban Lighting, Light Pollution, and Society* (2015) summarize the diverse values of the dark night sky, conceived of not only as a natural resource, but also as “a scenic asset and part of humanity’s cultural heritage, signifying more ecologically sustainable environments”¹⁰, as well as “a source of aesthetic, scientific and spiritual inspiration.”¹¹

Another relevant example is that of *urban nightlife*, in the broad sense of ordinary nocturnal life (night work, leisure, entertainment). Artificial illumination transformed modern cities, opening up divergent experiences and alternative valuations of night and darkness. Most of them are positive, since artificial illumination enabled vibrant night-time economies and leisure. Yet it

10 Sutton and Elvidge, ‘Night lights: An indicator of the good life?’, 2015.

11 Gallaway, ‘The value of the night sky’, 2015, p. 280; see also Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, p. 7. Within the urban areas, “the nocturnalization of tourism is also seen in growing popularity of visits to museums in the dark, graveyard tours, ghost walks and bat walks.” (Eldridge and Smith, ‘Tourism and the night: Towards a broader understanding of nocturnal city destinations’, 2019; Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, p. 7)

also produced over-lit “nocturnal landscapes” that consign darkness to marginal spaces, prompting calls to rethink urban lighting design. (Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, p. 22)

The sensory and affective ambivalence of nocturnal city life, and the multiple meanings of darkness not only reflect the new material conditions of illumination, but are also related to “the sensible fabric of experience”, since “the distribution of darkness and light” often remains geographically, socially and culturally specific. As many accounts of night/darkness have shown, for many people domestic spaces that embrace low light levels and darkness are experienced and valued as sites of “intimacy”; likewise, other urban public spaces with similar night atmosphere are imbued with qualities of “depth, mystery, introspection, imagination, variation, and theatricality”. For others—depending on gender, age, or ethnicity—darkness is still associated with fear, danger or vulnerability, while light, by contrast, evokes visibility, safety and orientation. (Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, pp. 23-24)

To understand this multiplicity, a third perspective is essential.

2.3. Night/Darkness as Regimes of Interpretation

Considering the perceptual and experiential regimes of night/darkness as regimes of interpretation is essential, since they are produced and distributed according to particular values – “categories that identify them, thought patterns that categorize and interpret them” (Rancière, 2013b, p. x). These interpretative frameworks have shaped, in turn, the perceptions of the night and nightly ordinary activities and objects, as distinct from the daily ones, as well as their experiencing and ambivalent affective overtones.

This threefold perspective is useful for approaching contemporary nocturnal cityscapes and life, and understanding both their production and experiencing and the correlated “affective atmospheres”.

In particular, I invoke here Rancière’s contention that the “regimes of the sensible” are shaped by particular values espoused by the powerful—“the elite”, “the power of educated senses”—as opposed to the “demos”, those who have no share in the communal distribution of the sensible (Rancière, 2009, pp. 24–26; 30–32, Rancière, 2013a, pp. 7–8, 42, 87–88). As Dunn

and Edensor note (2021a, p. 9), these values influence the production of nocturnal space and lighting regimes, shaping how darkness is experienced and interpreted. Matthew Gandy argues in ‘Urban atmospheres’ (2017) that this uneven distribution of the light—and, respectively, of the nocturnal sensible—is “integral to the changing sensory characteristics of late modernity [and] the contemporary city.” By these characteristics—including the sensory ones and the correlated “affective atmospheres”—he refers to the city’s quotidian “affective dynamics of everyday life” (that encompass the built environment), its “circadian rhythms” and “pervasive landscape or atmospheres of consumption and distraction”, but also to the “increased levels of technological control over society” (Gandy, 2017, p. 354). “Affective atmospheres” (shaped by sociocultural structures) is thus a key concept for accounting for the urban nocturnal sensible and its ambivalences:

Changing patterns of artificial illumination interface with multiple forms of subjectivities, both single and multiple, and extend to the more-than-human realm. In this sense, an *atmosphere* can be invoked as a kind of complex yet everchanging totality that is rooted in material forces yet connected with different forms of consciousness and experience. (Gandy, 2017, p. 368)¹²

Darkness is therefore not only sensory but political. This perspective helps us understand why *dark night* or *darkness* was and still is experienced, valued and interpreted not only as a realm of *danger* and *fear*, but also of *affordances* and *fascination*. Night turns up as a potential site for protest, subaltern resistance, subversion, and alternative identities. Historically, lower classes, marginal groups or persecuted minorities have used the night to create alternative social spaces outside daytime norms. For instance, it provided “an opportunity to escape day-time surveillance” or for “political debate, discourse and protest”. Therefore, darkness was imbued with positive qualities for these subaltern and oppositional groups. In the dark, they may “carve out time and space outside working time and achieve freedom from both labour and social scrutiny.” (Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, p. 5) In *A History of the Night in Early Modern Europe* Koslofsky describes and emphasizes a similar dialectic of the uneven production and distribution of light and nocturnal sensible: „As illumination has expanded, it has been resisted by ‘the traditional inhabitants of the night: servants, apprentices and students... tavern visitors, prostitutes’ and other workers and pleasure-seekers, because of the dark night’s affordances, such as the “possibilities for

¹² For this topic, see also Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, p. 9; Dunn and Edensor, 2021b, p. 232; Sumartojo et al., ‘Atmospheres in Urban Light’, 2019.

transgression, adventure, subversion and libidinal encounter.” (Koslofsky, 2011, p. 27; see also Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, pp. 5–6, 8)

In summary, I would say that the aesthetic production and distribution of the sensible (in a sense inspired by Rancière) have shaped both shared and divergent perceptions and experiences of the night and nightly ordinary activities and objects, as distinct from the daily ones. Likewise, all these have configured the complex and ambivalent ways people interpret and endorse different experiences and values attached to *night/nightness* and *dark/darkness*, compared to the *diurnal* “regime of visibility”, the day/dailyness and light/lightness.

My second claim is that artistic practices often intervene in these regimes. Certain pieces or instances of modern and contemporary arts and literature have further reframed or challenged the common perceptions and experiences of night or darkness, to incorporate different values. This claim will be substantiated here by some cases of artistic reappraisals of the night, darkness, and nocturnal practices and experiences of quotidian life.

3. Artistic Depictions of Night and Darkness

Art and literature have long explored the night and darkness as a domain of altered perception, emotion, and meaning (Bronfen 2013; Dewdney, 2010; Dunn and Edensor, 2021; Gosetti-Ferencei 2007). The study of how we experience quotidian life is enabled by visual arts and literature, if we consider these artistic media also as “forms of reflection on the very structure of the everyday world” (Gosetti-Ferencei, *The Ecstatic Quotidian*, 2007), and of the nocturnal life-world as well. Several exhibition catalogues and analyses of particular art works, events, performances and installations related to night and darkness have also contributed to this study (Fondation Cartier, 1996; Kerr 2008; Moore, 2016; Morris, 2011).

Even in the Renaissance, painting was not considered a medium unsuitable to depict *night* or *darkness*, which would otherwise be invisible and unrepresentable. Leonardo Da Vinci included in his *Treatise on Painting* a note on ‘How to represent Night’, offering technical advice on how

to overcome the absence of light in nocturnal actions or objects by using artificial firelight.¹³ Modern and contemporary art, however, goes beyond these techniques for representing nocturnal scenes to reshape and transform the common understanding of night and darkness, by envisioning different ways of perception, mediating multisensory experiences and challenging socio-cultural norms.

I briefly present here such transformations through a number of examples of artistic reappraisals of the night and darkness that may capture certain displacements in their perception, experiencing and interpretation.

3.1. Exhibitions and Night Imagery

The exhibition *By night* at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain in Paris (1996) presented nocturnal themes across literary and visual media, displaying writers, painters, photographers and video artists, from Victor Hugo to Nan Goldin, from Lewis Carroll to Bill Viola. The exhibition was structured around three main themes: the urban night and adventure, the night sky, and the night of sleep and dreams. This reconstituted history of night phenomena, objects and activities witnesses for the “fascination and emotion exerted by night-time”, and emphasized night as a pivotal site of aesthetic investigation and identity formation. (Fondation Cartier, 1996)

Likewise, Janette Kerr's exhibition catalogue *Night: A Time Between* (2008) highlights night as a space of unexpected possibilities—for expression, intimacy, and creativity. The various depictions of nocturnal natural landscapes and cityscapes in this exhibition evoke atmospheres that convey qualities not only of depth, mystery, and adventure, but also of introspection, imagination, variation, theatricality, and intimacy. All of this stimulate creativity and imaginative approaches to space, producing “new immersive and participatory aesthetics”.¹⁴

¹³ “THOSE objects which are entirely deprived of light, are lost to the sight, as in the night; therefore, if you mean to paint a history under those circumstances, you must suppose a large fire, and those objects that are near it to be tinged with its colour, and the nearer they are the more they will partake of it.” (Leonardo Da Vinci, *A Treatise on Painting*, 2014, chapter CLXII. – How to represent Night.)

¹⁴ Kerr (ed.), *Night: A Time Between*, 2008, p. 6; see also Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, pp. 11–18, 23–24; Dunn and Edensor, 2021b, p. 237.

Some of the key themes in these painterly representations drawn out by Janette Kerr in this exhibition catalogue are:

‘Exoticism and frailty of existence, human paranoia and psychological uncertainty, temporal shifts, voyeurism and concealment, references to the metaphysical and vanitas, and to night’s physical state, where objects dissolve and merge, and distance distorts’. The catalogue reveals that painters conjure many *nocturnal qualities*: forms of light that seem unearthly, the silvery reflection of moon on water or bursting through clouds and vague glimmers and barely visible shadowy entities and dark silhouettes. *The urban night* has proved a fertile landscape for different representations of darkness that increasingly became sharper and scarcer as artificial illumination becomes more prominent. (Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, pp. 17–18; my emphasis)

3.2.Night-time Installation Art

Darkness has also been inventively exploited in art events, installations and performances not only to challenge its common appraisal as “frightening void” or “mere absence of light”, but also to reconfigure our relationships to natural landscape. A case in point is the night event-installation, *The Storr: Unfolding Landscape* (2005), created by the Scottish arts group NVA (Nacionale Vite Activa) on the Isle of Skye. This is how Nina Morris described it in ‘Night walking: darkness and sensory perception in a night-time landscape installation’ (2011):

The work involved the audience moving up and across the hillside after dark with minimal illumination, confronting a series of enactions and installations that aimed to deepen their apprehension and understanding of the landscape. Participants walked through woods and rugged slopes in varying weather conditions; witnessed pale projections of moving figures; listened to peculiar recorded sounds, poetry and music; and at the climax of the uphill section, confronted an array of illuminated rocky ridges. (Morris, 2011, p. 335; Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, p. 20)

As Morris (2011) argues, this temporary night-time event-installation revealed the nocturnal landscape as dynamic and sensorially rich, fostering a heightened sense of self and environment. Her post-phenomenological account shows how individuals experienced the nocturnal landscape “as a dynamic, animated entity, an active agent which is always ‘in process’ (as

opposed to one which is static, fixed and easily definable)". The analysis of this event-installation also reveals the *night/dark* as a richly "textured realm of sensory perception", and as "presence" rather than "absence", which "engenders a different sense of self within the landscape to that which might be experienced during daylight hours."¹⁵

3.3. Bill Viola's Night Imagery

Another example that illustrates the artistic engagement with the *nocturnal sensible* is Bill Viola's night imagery and his use of darkness and dark room in video art to create immersive perceptual environments exploring transformation, mortality, and spiritual insight. It is relevant in this context not only because Viola is one of the world's leading video artists, but also because Rancière refers to him in *The Future of the Image* (2007, chapter 'Sentence, Image, History', pp. 63–67) and *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (2009, chapter 'Problems and Transformations of Critical Art', pp. 58–59). As Rancière notes, with some dissatisfaction, referring to some art installations and video pieces, including the most ambitious project by Bill Viola, *Going Forth by Day* (2002), through them "mystery", which was the central concept of Symbolism, is back on the agenda of contemporary art yet without sufficient critical engagement. (Rancière, 2009, p. 58)

More specifically, Rancière's critique targeted certain types of contemporary installations and exhibitions, such as the exhibition *Moving Pictures* staged at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2002, criticized by him because they "play on the fluctuating boundary between critical provocation and the undecidability of its meaning." (Rancière, 2009, p. 59) Yet Rancière identifies beyond this ambiguity a latent and apparently disturbing tendency, that is, the shift from "the interrogation of perceptual stereotypes towards a quite different interest in the uncertain boundaries between the familiar and the strange, the real and the symbolic that had fascinated painters at the time of Symbolism, metaphysical painting and magical realism." (Rancière, 2007, p. 64; Rancière, 2009, p. 59)

According to Rancière, this shift was spectacularly underscored by Bill Viola's installation called *Going Forth by Day* (2002). This consists of "five simultaneous video projections covering the walls of a dark rectangular room, where visitors stand on a central carpet", and does not

15 Morris, 'Night walking: darkness and sensory perception in a night-time landscape installation', 2011, pp. 315, 334–335; see also Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, p. 20.

hide “a certain nostalgia for the great painting and fresco series” (Rancière, 2007, p. 64–65). Rancière briefly describes and interprets this video installation as follows:

[It] beamed onto the four walls of a dark room flames and floods, slow processions, urban wandering, wakes and ship embarkation, to symbolize, in addition to the four elements, the great cycles of birth, life, death and rebirth. Experimental video art thus manifests in plain language the latent tendency of many of today’s *dispositifs* by miming, in its own way, the great frescos of human destiny so admired by the Symbolist and Expressionist age. (Rancière, 2009, p. 59)¹⁶

Therefore, what Rancière detects and criticizes is specifically this shift, part of the larger “shift from dialectical conflict to symbolist community characteristic of works and installations that employ traditional materials and means of expression” (2007, p. 66), which conveys in its turn a “more fundamental undecidability in the politics of the art” (2009, p. 60). In other words, Rancière draws attention to the contrast between “two poetics of the image”—the revival and prevalence of “a melancholy relating to the world in common that art once carried in it”, over “the interrogation of perceptual stereotypes” able to “reshape political spaces” (Rancière, 2009, p. 59–60):

Today, the photographic sequences, the video monitors or projections, the installation of familiar or strange objects that fill the spaces of museums and galleries seek less to create the sense of a *gap* between two orders—between *everyday appearances* and the *laws of domination*—than to increase a *new sensitivity* to the signs and traces that testify to a *common history* and a *common world*. (Rancière, 2007, pp. 66–67; my emphasis)

It is true that Viola’s cutting-edge video installations engage with the history of art and are thematically rooted in the European art-historical tradition (both modern and old masters), and leave room for *mystery*. (Guggenheim Museum, 2005; Oleynick, 2019) Yet I would argue that the spiritual and theological “mysteries” evoked by Viola’s video art symbolize deeper realities

16 In contrast, this is how Viola’s video installation is described on the webpage of Guggenheim Museum: “Going Forth By Day is an epic, five-part projection-based installation that addresses the complexity of human existence and explores cycles of birth, death, and rebirth. A different phase is embodied in each of the five looped projections with audio accompaniment. In one sequence, a community is shown anticipating and then fleeing from a deluge while another panel predicts a hopeful future as dawn illuminates a ravaged landscape. Each video is projected directly onto the wall of the exhibition space, just as the paint of a fresco adheres to the surface of a plaster wall. Viola acknowledges the influence of Giotto’s fresco cycle in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, a Renaissance work that, like Viola’s installation, occupies an architectural space through which the viewer may physically pass.” (Guggenheim Museum, 2005). The title of the work comes from the literal translation of the title of The Egyptian Book of the Dead, where the soul is freed from the darkness of the body to finally “go forth by the light of day”. (James Cohan, 2002)

than the “everyday appearances” criticized by Rancière; rather, they “help us to see what we ordinarily can’t”, as Bill Viola himself emphasized (quoted in Oleynick, 2019).

On the one hand, Viola engages with night/darkness through complex perceptual experiences, visual and acoustic. There is first the literal or material darkness shared by the videos and the dark room, which makes Viola’s video installations “total environments that envelop the spectators in image and sound”, thus allowing them “a total aesthetic, sensory, and philosophical experience”. On the other hand, this exploration of the phenomena of sense perception is used by Viola as “an avenue to self-knowledge”, to deal with major themes of human existence—individuality, society, life, death and rebirth. (Perov, *Bill Viola. Biography*, 2024)

For instance, Viola often uses darkness or twilight as metaphors for “transformation” and “self-understanding”. In his video installations, like the seven displayed in the 2019 retrospective *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like: The Art of Bill Viola* at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia, characters emerge frequently from darkness and undergo mystical changes. The film *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like* (1986), which lend the title of the exhibition, is structured in five parts, “The Dark Body”, “The Language of the Birds”, “The Night of Sense”, “Stunned by the Drum”, and “The Living Flame”. It “unfolds as a wordless odyssey, an epic quest for self-understanding and transcendence, through an awareness of the Other (embodied here by a shamanistic vision of animal consciousness)”. Likewise, other Viola videos seek to dramatize how apparent voids contain potent insight and to show that “darkness and defeat aren’t necessarily negative”, but they are crucial stages in the soul’s journey to God, as in the 16th-century mystical poem *Dark Night of the Soul* of St. John of the Cross that fascinated him in college. Viola has later turned the paradoxical imagery of this poem—the night shining like sunrise, the oblivion yielding knowledge—into a video installation in 1983, entitled *Room for St. John of the Cross*. (Oleynick, 2019)

Therefore, Viola’s night imagery—waterfalls at midnight, figures traversing dark chambers or emerging from, and returning to, darkness—symbolizes more than the mystery of the Symbolist age: it expresses profound existential and spiritual themes, showing darkness as a generative rather than purely negative state, that is, as a passage toward self-knowledge, that touches on the universal and, possibly, shared transcendence.

4. Conclusion: Elements of an Aesthetics of the Night

This discussion has shown how night and darkness have been perceived, experienced, interpreted, and artistically reimagined across historical, social, and cultural contexts, thus framing their diversity, plurality, and rich aesthetic meanings and effects. Several key elements of an *aesthetics of the night* have emerged, showing how the dialectical interplay of light and darkness and the *night-time*, as a distinct temporal structure of the quotidian life-world, also structure our aesthetic experience by reshaping space and temporality and thus affording new ways of understanding ourselves and our life-world. These elements can be summarized as follows:

Multisensory engagement beyond visual norms: darkness enhances non-visual senses and recalibrates perception.

Transformation of spatial and temporal experience: the light/dark dialectic reshapes how space and time are apprehended.

Ambivalent atmospheres: night evokes depth, mystery and adventure, but also intimacy and introspection; danger, fear and vulnerability, but also sociability and affordances.

Alternative aesthetic potentials: night offers opportunities for creative, affective, and transgressive practices.

Self-reflection and identity formation: night-time provides conditions for introspection, existential exploration, and self-discovery or self-fashioning.

Exploring night and darkness thus enriches our understanding of ordinary aesthetic experience and demonstrates the potential of Everynight Aesthetics as a field of inquiry. Further research may examine how nocturnality continues to transform contemporary life-worlds.

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