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## RETHINKING THE SPACES OF NIGHT-TIME SOCIABILITY

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At 8:00 p.m. on 9 January 2021, I walked through the streets of my Montreal neighborhood with a photographer and journalist from *Le Devoir*, the local newspaper informally regarded as the most “intellectual.” This was the first night of Montreal’s 8:00 p.m. curfew, imposed in response to signs of a third wave of COVID-19 infections. On this rare night walk through the city, the journalist wanted me to comment on what the pandemic had done to the night-time of cities.<sup>1</sup> Journalism, the Quebec government had decided, was one of the activities (along with walking your dog) that could justify being out at night, and the journalist carried a note from her employer in case the police stopped us. As we walked along empty streets, we talked about the emptiness of the city and how this increased rather than reduced one’s sense of risk and danger in the urban night. We spoke, as well, about the ways in which night-time sociability was central to our sense of the city as a space of experimentation and transgression.

Arguments favoring loosened restrictions on nightlife circulated widely in early 2021. They included anthropological claims about the role of festivity in producing social cohesion,<sup>2</sup> psychological explanations about the positive relationship between nocturnal sociability and mental health,<sup>3</sup> and theories of urban space insisting on the essential role of night-time encounters in producing a sense of urbanity.<sup>4</sup> My interview with the *Le Devoir* journalist came at something of a pivotal moment in the transnational circulation of ideas about what can be termed “the politics of the night.” Like many North Americans, I had spent the latter half of 2020 appalled by the insistence of right-wing politicians or COVID-19 deniers on a “right to party,” which they believed should over-ride lockdown measures I was willing to accept as necessary.<sup>5</sup> It was easy to contrast these unnuanced demands to the cautious, detailed plans for an eventual reopening of nightlife contained in documents like the six chapters of the Global

Nighttime Recovery Plan (GNRP), published at intervals since July 2020 by some of the world's leading activists and entrepreneurs in the field of night-time culture.<sup>6</sup>

By the end of 2020, however, a more progressive opposition to curfews and the closing of night-time culture was being knit together. Some of the most fully articulated versions of this opposition, it seemed, were coming from France. In November 2020, an annual event called the “Festival Culture Bars–Bars,” which for twenty years had celebrated the role of cultural cafés across France, renamed and re-envisioned itself as an “états généraux du droit à la fête” (general assembly of the right to celebration), a plenary in support of the right to festivity. (While Google translates “droit à la fête” as the “right to party,” this narrow translation obscures the term's more political association with collective expression, and brings it uncomfortably close to the slogans of right-wing US anti-lockdown forces.) One output of this group was a white paper, released in January of 2021 in France, whose 82 pages were full of lists of ways in which all levels of government might engage in new approaches to the culture of the night. Like so many documents urging the re-opening of nightlife, this one noted that the culture of the night had been the “first victim” of the pandemic.<sup>7</sup>

While in its title, and in some of its rhetoric, the white paper looked at first glance like a strident manifesto, rejecting all compromise, its weightiness resided more in the lengthy number of highly specific proposals if offered, for everything from the digital recording of live night-time cultural events through to temporary changes in the function of spaces (such as making parks into cafés.) Underlying many of the proposals was an insistence that governments work more closely with the night-time cultural sector in planning a re-opening of its institutions. One of the document's more dramatic demands was for the creation in France of a “national night council” (*conseil national de la nuit*), which would bring the treatment of the night to the attention of the national government, rather than leaving it to the night mayors, night councils, and city-based “charters of the night” that had emerged over two decades of innovation in the field of what is now called “night-time governance.”<sup>8</sup>

The white paper issued by Les états généraux du droit à la fête echoed claims made elsewhere in the world by the night-time cultural sector (of bars and club industries, in particular) about the need to be consulted concerning its own fate. Sometimes, these claims resulted in hashtag mobilizations for loosened restrictions, like the “sillas al revés” [“upside-down chairs”] movement in Argentina, or the #abrimosomorimos [“We will open or we will die”] Twitter campaign launched by restaurants in Mexico. A common complaint, from the dance club sector in particular, was that the deeply entrenched experience with self-policing, crowd control, and hygiene that the sector had developed over many years was being ignored by authorities in their plans for re-opening.

Elsewhere in France, many of those with an interest in the night were expressing more maximalist positions. After French police closed down a New Year's Eve “free party” in December 2020, anthropologist Emmanuelle

Lallemen, interviewed by the newspaper *Le Monde*, fought back against the notion that night-time sociability was somehow “non-essentiel”—anthropological knowledge, she suggested, had taught us that it was not. Nor, Lallemen argued, should we leave it to authorities to distinguish between the acceptable social gatherings of families during holiday seasons and those deemed in violation of sanitary protocols, like gatherings of young people in rave-like situations.<sup>9</sup> During the same period, mobilization against France’s proposed Global Security Law (which, among other measures, would have made it illegal to film police officers performing certain actions, and allowed for the police use of drone-based surveillance to maintain public order and the widespread sharing by public institutions of images taken by public surveillance cameras) became intertwined with an activism defending the “right to culture.” While, in recent years, Henri Lefebvre’s “right to the city” has spawned calls for a more specific “right to the night” (for women and other groups susceptible to night-time danger),<sup>10</sup> the “droit à la fête” of 2020 found expanded form in calls for a “right to culture,” advanced at the December *Etats généraux* and afterwards brandished more broadly.<sup>11</sup>

## Ground-level transformation

I have thus far sketched in the shape and substance of higher-level debates over the closing of nightlife and its possible meanings. My attention will now turn to some of the lower-level transformations that occurred within cities around the world as spaces were re-organized, their functions altered, and new hybrid forms and practices emerged, all with the aim of offering partial remedies for the closing down of nightlife.

In the detailed histories of the pandemic to come, one hopes to see complete accounts of all the ways in which urban life underwent experimental transformations; suffice it here to list but a few. For example, some of these transformations produced new hybrid spaces, like cinemas selling plants or former music venues re-ordering themselves as boutiques. The interventions of others redistributed cultural experience across the spaces of cities, installing movie screens in waterways or disco sound systems in automobiles. Yet another series of transformations involved mutations whereby nightclubs became bars and bars became restaurants, each move in this sequence taking us towards institutions more typical of daytime, sedentary sociability than of uncontrolled, nocturnal mixing.

Let us begin with the first of these, the hybridization of spaces. In his typology of forms of hybridization, the French geographer Luc Gwiazdzinski differentiates between these in terms of the extent to which they enact change at the level of temporalities, spatialities, practices, or individuals.<sup>12</sup> For instance, in my own city, Montreal, the pandemic led many cafés and restaurants to become retail outlets of a sort, as they added, to the normal offerings of food or drink, items such as T-shirts, plants, books, cooking utensils, works of art, COVID-19 masks, and other commodities. The *Cinéma Moderne*, a relatively new repertory cinema on the St-Laurent Boulevard, became a greenhouse during the first wave of

lockdowns, filling its café-bar space with growing plants that remained visible, through the site's large windows, throughout the winter. On its re-opening in the summer of 2020, the *Cinéma Moderne* sold plants on the street in a massively popular multi-day event that lasted until its harvest was sold. Just down the street, an important live music venue turned its performance space into a boutique selling silk-screened paraphernalia and locally produced handicrafts.

If one logic seemed to prevail here, it was the reduction of specialized retail or cultural outlets to their shared minimal status as street-facing spaces, from within which combinations of things might be sold. These combinations were not random, of course; usually the array of things on offer built outwards from the venue's original key attraction (films, music, food, coffee) to construct strings of commodities loosely expressive of the taste cultures to which their original attraction belonged. (The growing of plants in a tiny repertory cinema could be seen as congruent with the latter's small-is-beautiful ethos.) At the level of temporalities, spaces whose core functions made them liveliest at night used these new offerings to insert themselves into the economies (of shopping and eating) more typical of the day and early evening. In the process, the most subcultural of such places attracted a broader range of customers than they would normally, even if the numbers of these was not greater. In most cases that I saw, the windows of these establishments became crowded displays of all they had to offer, rather than curated, minimal signifiers of purpose or style. Restaurants in Montreal, which under a pandemic lifting of restrictions were now able to sell alcohol for take-away, offered the unprecedented spectacle of bottles of wine crowded in their windows, unashamedly made visible as enticements to purchase.

These transformations of space renewed a sense of novelty and adventure for those walking down familiar city streets. A second sort of transformation involved the conversion of transportation vehicles into places of self-isolation for the consumption of cultural forms typically associated with the night. The privatized spaces of the automobile or small boat were embraced during the pandemic as technologies for constraining movement and enforcing social distancing during the consumption of music or cinema. If the plastic isolation pods whose arrival was regularly predicted in 2020 scarcely materialized, forms of transport long criticized for their wasteful pandering to individualized travel were now embraced for the barriers they offered against interpersonal proximity. The revival of the drive-in cinema—in the United States, to be sure, but also in Quebec, Argentina, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere (for more on this topic, see chapter 15 in this volume)—was the most publicized example of this repurposing of technologies of mobility,<sup>13</sup> but we may note, as well, experiments with “floating cinemas,”<sup>14</sup> in places like Paris and Tel Aviv, in which spectators watched movies from small boats. We may point, as well, to the significant international spread of drive-in musical events at which people listened to live music from within automobiles or perched on bicycles.<sup>15</sup> An outdoor concert for people in cars, held in Indiana in July 2020 and featuring the “Yacht Rock Revue,” was notable for its overlay of the histories of drive-in cinema and in-car

music-listening, and all the more remarkable for joining these histories to the consumption of a musical genre associated with the pleasures of luxury boating.<sup>16</sup>

These hybridizations of spatial function and conversions of normal use during COVID-19 circulated, for the most part, anecdotally rather than programmatically, adding to long lists of examples of the inventiveness of pandemic culture. My third example of transformations brings me closer to key issues surrounding the future of nightlife and the ways in which it is regulated. I refer to these transformations as “transfers,” in the sense that they involved the imposition of uses and forms of control characteristic of one space onto another. The clearest example of this imposition, and the one I will discuss at greatest length, is the re-ordering of different spaces of night-time sociability around the spatial organization and behavioral protocols of the restaurant. A second, less widespread example of this transfer is the transformation of nightclubs into institutions of the art world, like museums and galleries.

The first of these transfers was widespread, as discothèques in different countries reinvented themselves as sit-down bars. However, as bars themselves had been converted so as to make the serving of food to customers at tables a key pandemic function, there was a general drift of drinking places morphing towards a spatial organization that was akin to that of a restaurant. In the July 2020 partial re-opening of nightlife establishments in Madrid, it was reported that “[c]ocktail bars, dance halls and discos will be able to use the dance floor to place tables, always keeping a distance of 1.5 meters between them. And you can have a drink at the bar, but in no case will dancing or crowds be allowed.”<sup>17</sup> Across Colombia and Mexico, later in the summer, the transformation of bars into restaurants was widely noted.<sup>18</sup> A more noteworthy development was the crisis of LGBTQ venues in Mexico City’s Zona Rosa neighborhood. Cabarets and clubs in the area were converted to restaurants, with one of them, Cabaret Tito, claiming that it was now the first LGBTQ-themed restaurant in the country.<sup>19</sup> Drag queens from the Zona Rosa had moved in large numbers to the city’s Centro Historico to work as wait staff in mainstream restaurants.<sup>20</sup>

A much less widespread but symptomatic effect of the pandemic was the conversion of spaces of night-time festivity into galleries or museums. Much was made in Bogota, Colombia, of the announcement that El Castillo, variously described as a mafia hangout and erotically tinged nightclub, would be converted into a cultural center and “museum of the night,” as it was unlikely to be able to return to its original functions even when the pandemic had subsided.<sup>21</sup> What we might see as El Castillo’s museumification of its own history and function seemed to be replicated in the “immersive art” installation *Eleven Songs*, which opened in the space of the Berlin techno club Berghain in August 2020. An important institution in Berlin’s nightlife history, the Berghain Club was long known as an openly sex-positive club, but by the following month, Berghain hoped that its conversion to a gallery space might be made permanent; the artists and works publicized for exhibition would be meaningful through the normal circuits of art-world discourse, rather than from engaging reflexively with Berghain’s own legacy.<sup>22</sup>

We might, clumsily, refer to these two developments as the “restaurantization” and “museumification” of nocturnal culture life. Both of these processes had been underway within cultures of urban nightlife since the beginning of this century. Elsewhere I have discussed the ways in which bars offering food and a curated ambiance of recorded music have displaced venues more exclusively devoted to the performance and experience of music.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, if the night-time cultural life of cities has been “art-ified,” this is also part of the thirty-year move of consecrated cultural forms—like visual art, museum exhibitions, and literary readings—later into the night through late-night festivals devoted to each of these. The broader expansion of what has been called the “lates” movement—the proliferation of late-night offerings in the cultural sector, from bookstore to museum nights, in cities throughout Europe and much of the Americas—is the clearest evidence of these impulses and changes.<sup>24</sup>

On the one hand, this museumification of night-time spaces was intended to cleanse the night by diminishing its associations with alcohol and revelry. On the other hand, it was also a strategic move intended to adorn respectable cultural forms with the youthful buzz of late-night sociability, by incorporating within them, if only on special “social nights,” the mixes of music and alcohol that audiences associate with popular music. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, both “restaurantization” and “museumification” represent legitimate responses in contexts where government emergency measures have abandoned night-time dance clubs to a possible disappearance, while restaurant personnel and museal institutions in countries like Canada have been the recipients of ongoing pandemic support measures.

### The discothèque as space of control

In an interview spread over two articles in the Argentinian newspaper *El Territorio* in February 2021, anthropologist Lucia Fretes spoke of the new sociabilities that had emerged among young people through the ongoing mutations of spaces of sociable congregation. Restrictions imposed on nightclubs or discothèques (*boliches*) had led, on the one hand, to their transformation into bars offering food and live musical performances. On the other hand, the disappearance of dance clubs had spurred an increase in house parties and small get-togethers in public space, making the itinerary of any given evening a more complicated affair, both multi-staged and multi-sited.<sup>25</sup> Thus I will close by noting a peculiar shift in perceptions of the discothèque or dance club since the beginning of the pandemic. The dance club has been one of those institutions whose eventual re-opening has been absent from most official scenarios. Even as I write this chapter, near the end of lockdown measures in Montreal in May 2021, and with return dates for festivals, live theatre, cinema, and indoor dining all available on official timetables, there is no indication when the dance club might return to anything like its pre-pandemic form.

If the dance club’s image as a space of unregulated intermingling keeps its fate in doubt, in certain jurisdictions at least, what may save it is its capacity to

reterritorialize interaction in contexts where night-time sociability has taken over outdoor, public space. To put it differently, if, in comparison to the sit-down bar, the dance club is a space of undisciplined movement, it might, in contrast to the street party or the clandestine rave, be seen as an effective way of containing and controlling bodies.

In December 2020, an association representing the owners of Argentinian discothèques wrote to governments asking them what they preferred: a world of public, unregulated parties, or a nightlife of discothèques in which sanitary measures were reinforced and behaviors might be regulated.<sup>26</sup> Since the lifting of restrictions on nightlife in Barcelona, most nights in the spring of 2021 were marked by police action against *botellons* (street gatherings with alcohol consumption). *Botellons* have their own history and rationales—in particular, they are a way of avoiding the high prices of admission or alcoholic drinks associated with nightclubs or bars—but their recent growth has been mobilized as an argument for the re-opening of discothèques or dance clubs.<sup>27</sup> An organization representing Spanish nightclubs held out the image, intended to frighten, of Spain becoming a “nation of ‘macrobotellones,’” of massive, uncontrollable social gatherings on the night-time streets of cities.<sup>28</sup>

In Paris, plans for the summer of 2021 were haunted by the image of the previous year, when the tables and chairs of outdoor terraces did not sufficiently discipline bodies to prevent the eruption of street parties in neighborhoods and spontaneous raves in the Bois de Vincennes and elsewhere.<sup>29</sup> In Bogotá, in 2020, restaurant owners complained that city-dwellers did not fully acknowledge that the outdoor areas in which businesses were now allowed to operate were not public spaces, to be occupied by non-customers as they wished, but extensions of their own, private space, and to be controlled as such.<sup>30</sup>

Historians of recent nightlife have noted the ways in which outdoor raves of the 1990s were closed in part to protect a commercial club scene for which they were competition;<sup>31</sup> later, in the 2010s, the spread of electronic dance music festivals served in similar fashion to “reterritorialize” and re-commercialize the experience of large outdoor music events. If the venues of night-time culture (clubs and discothèques) are to be re-opened, this may have less to do with the success of battles to restore them as spaces of freedom and experimentation. Their re-opening is more likely due to the recognition that they are effective places of enclosure, ways of limiting the undisciplined occupation of public space.

## Notes

- 1 Catherine Lalonde, “Une nuit sans feu ni flamme à Montréal,” *Le Devoir*, 11 January 2021.
- 2 Fanny Lévesque, “Adhésion Aux Consignes Sanitaires | Les Québécois Reçoivent Encore Des Visiteurs à La Maison,” *La Presse*, 9 June 2021.
- 3 “Le couvre-nuit doit cesser,” *Libération*, 2 March 2021.
- 4 “Prendre le(s) temps de la ville,” *Dixit*, 16 February 2021.

- 5 “Florida Governor Proposes College ‘Bill of Rights’ to Party,” AP News, 24 September 2020.
- 6 “The Global Nighttime Recovery Plan” (Berlin: Vibelab, 2020) is an initiative of the Vibelab, a consultancy based in Berlin and Amsterdam, with additional involvement from researchers working at the University of Pennsylvania and Humboldt University.
- 7 Les états généraux du droit à la fête, “Livre Blanc” (January 2021).
- 8 For an overview of these developments, see Andreina Seijas and Mirik Milan Gelders, “Governing the Night-Time City: The Rise of Night Mayors as a New Form of Urban Governance after Dark,” *Urban Studies* 58, no. 2 (2020): 316–34; Will Straw and Jess Reia, “Nightlife in a Pandemic,” in *Pandemic Societies*, ed. Jean-Louis Denis, Catherine Régis, and Daniel Weinstock (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2021), 9–20.
- 9 Romain Geoffroy, “A partir du moment où elles deviennent interdites, les fêtes nous montrent à quel point elles sont nécessaires,” *Le Monde*, 5 January 2021.
- 10 See, for a discussion of the “right to the night,” Catherine Deschamps, “Le Genre du Droit à la nuit Parisienne,” in *Cohabiter les nuits urbaines*, ed. Alain Montandon, Florian Guérin and Edna Hernandez Gonzalez (Paris: l’Harmattan, 2018), 23–37.
- 11 Romain Geoffroy, “Des fêtes condamnées à la clandestinité, faute d’alternatives légales et de propositions politiques,” *Le Monde*, 19 January 2021. See also Antoine Chao, “Envie de vivre #2 – Mobilisation Sonore,” *france inter*, 18 January 2021.
- 12 See Luc Gwiadzinski, “De l’hybridation territoriale à la créolisation des mondes,” in *L’hybridation des mondes. Territoires et organisations à l’épreuve de l’hybridation* (Grenoble: Elya, 2016), 311–34.
- 13 Elissaveta M. Brandon, “How the American Drive-In Staged a Comeback,” *Bloomberg*, 4 September 2020; Alex Scimecca and Radhika Marya, “Photo Essay: The Drive-in Sees a Resurgence throughout the World,” *Fortune*, 1 August 2020; Naman Ramachandran, “Drive-In Cinemas Expand Across the UK During Coronavirus,” *Variety*, 21 July 2020.
- 14 Julija Svidraité, “Paris Opens the Summer Season With Socially Distant Floating Cinema,” *Bored Panda* (blog), 2020; Will Straw, “La Municipalidad de Tel Aviv Abre El Cine Flotante Sail-in,” *Aurora*, 13 August 2020.
- 15 “Cantando Frank Sinatra, Gustavo Bing embala noite de sábado com show drive-in em Porto Alegre,” *GZH*, 26 July 2020; Scimecca and Marya, “Photo Essay.”
- 16 Sarah Bahr, “Yacht Rock Revue Kicks Off First Night of Drive-In Concerts in Indiana,” *New York Times*, 11 July 2020.
- 17 Mariela León, “Madrid reanuda su vida nocturna de copas, pero sin baile,” *Cambio 16* (blog), 2 July 2020 (my translation.) See also, with respect to the Canary Islands, “Discotecas y locales nocturnos también podrán abrir desde mañana pero sin baile,” *Canarias en reds*, 7 June 2020.
- 18 “Bares y antros podrán reabrir en CdMx, pero como restaurantes.” *El Milenio*, 7 August 2020; María Camila Pérez Godoy, “Discotecas Se Adaptarían Para Funcionar Como Restaurantes.” *Portafolio*, 9 July 2020.
- 19 Pedro Pablo Cortés, “De Antros LGBT a Restaurantes Para Sobrevivir a La COVID. Así Se Reinventa La Zona Rosa En CdMx,” *Sin Embargo MX*, 16 August 2020.
- 20 Inés Amarelo, “Drag Queens Dejan Zona Rosa de CdMx Por La COVID-19; Encuentran Trabajo Como Meseras En El Centro,” *Sin Embargo MX*, 24 July 2020.
- 21 See, for example, “¿Qué funcionará en el famoso Castillo, en Bogotá?” *Pulzo*, 15 December 2020; and Ana Puentes, “El Castillo: De Club Nocturno de La Mafia a Centro Cultural En Bogotá,” *El Tiempo*, 24 January 2021.
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- 26 "Dueños de Discotecas: 'Los Responsables de Las Consecuencias de La Clandestinidad Serán Las Autoridades,'" *El Cronista*, 18 December 2020.
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- 28 "La patronal del ocio nocturno pide abrir o España se convertirá en un 'macrobotellón,'" *Heraldo de Aragón*, 6 May 2021.
- 29 "Droit au sommeil ou à la fête? À Paris, le retour des terrasses éphémères ravive le débat," *Paris-Normandie*, 18 May 2021.
- 30 Valeria Cortés Bernal, "Las Lecciones Que Deja La Pandemia a Los Restaurantes," *El Espectador*, 12 September 2020.
- 31 See, among other accounts, John Hutnyk, "Repetitive Beatings or Criminal Justice," in *Dis-Orienting Rhythms: The Politics of the New Asian Dance Music*, ed. Sanjay Sharma, John Hutnyk, and Ashwani Sharma (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1996), 156–89.