



HAL
open science

Nights and mountains. Preliminary explorations of a double frontier

Luc Gwiazdzinski, Will Straw

► **To cite this version:**

Luc Gwiazdzinski, Will Straw. Nights and mountains. Preliminary explorations of a double frontier. *Revue de Géographie Alpine / Journal of Alpine Research*, 2018, 106 (1), pp.1-7. 10.4000/rga.3979 . halshs-01769585

HAL Id: halshs-01769585

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01769585>

Submitted on 18 Apr 2018

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Nights and mountains
Preliminary explorations of a double frontier
Journal of Alpine Research | *Revue de géographie alpine* [En ligne], 106-1 | 2018

Luc Gwiazdzinski, Will Straw (*)

The night has long been a time-space marked by the low investment of human activity - a time of pausing, a « border », in the American sense of frontier, «a limit reached through the exploitation and advancement of colonizers looking to establish outposts in lands hitherto empty or sparsely populated” (Brunet, 1992). It has been a limit at which one encounters not one’s neighbours but the unknown -- the mark, in other words, of a territory to be explored. Times have changed, however. Over the last twenty years, we may point to a colonization of the night by human activities. These movements of extension beyond the limits of the day (Gwiazdzinski, 2003 ; Crary, 2013), this *nocturnalization* (Koslowski, 2011) of society and *diurnalization* of the night are now well studied in relation to urban contexts, to the point at which one may now speak of the emergence of “Night Studies” in relation to urban contexts (Straw, 2017). The same changes are less examined outside of cities and, in particular, in relation to mountains, territories which are regularly subject to exploitation and reinvention (Sgard, 2001). Beyond the clichés that surround them, both the mountain and the night are now observed and studied separately as territories of innovation (Attali, Granet Bisset, Dalmaso, 2014 ; Gwiazdzinski, 2015).

The pioneering works presented here -- on landscapes and their artialisation (Bruno Charlier), on night-time environments as research foci (Challéat S., Lapostolle D., Milian J.), on the staging of night-time spectacles (Wei Xiang, Philippe Bachimon), on touristic revitalisation (Vincent Grèzes, Sandra Grèzes et Rafael Matos-Wasem), on the architecture of high altitude dwellings (Roberto Dini et Stefano Girodo), on representations of movement (Bing J.B.) or festivals (C. Baticle, P. Hanus) -- offer a varied set of approaches for exploring the double frontier of night and mountains, and the triple margins of “mountain”, “night” and “forest” (Bing, 2018).

Mystery and the danger of the margin

Traditionally, the night has been imagined in negative terms (Durand, 1960), and the mountain as an unknown and frightful space (Dini R., Girodo S., 2018). Darkness (Bachelard, 1957) is associated with agitation, impurity and noise. Peaks and nights – situated as they are at the margins of a social life concentrated in the daytime moments of anthropized spaces – share a piece of mystery, of common dangers for the humans who frequent them so seldomly (Bing, 2018) and for so long did not seek to explore them. For a long time, night and mountain were known and mapped only by “local” populations, and by the holders of power – armies, in particular – who sought to control them. Both night and mountain have a connection to the divine, to mythologies and legends. If God is Light, then shadows may be the domain of evil alone. Night, then, is the place par excellence in which enemies of the human race sought to vanquish it in both physical and moral terms (Delumeau, 1978). While, for the ancient Greeks, the mountain was a residence of the Gods, for Roman mythology it was more often the home of hostile divinities. Natural phenomena which for so long went unexplained (fog, the noise of glaciers, strange reliefs . . .) helped shape legends (Besson, 2011) in which evil played a major role. Like the night, the mountain also served as refuge for certain populations that were hunted during the day and on flat ground, adding to its mystery and distinctive character. The Church set out to occupy this space, to exorcise it

through the building of chapels and crosses on mountain passes and peaks. Monasteries, devoted to prayer and spiritual elevation, were built on deserts. As annexes of a sovereignty to which they were external (Guichonnet, 1980), mountains like the Alps have been zones of political rivalry, of military clashes in which they function as barrier, spaces which rulers have sought to control. In this they have been like the night, which has confronted the development of lighting and the deployment of forces of order sent by the day. Until the 18th century, travellers, who in the wake of Rousseau set out to discover the exoticism of the Alps as part of their “Grand Tour” would not speak of mountains in laudatory terms. The drama which still accompanies the conquest of peaks has no doubt reinforced the image of « dangerousness » associated with the mountain top. The “touristic invention” (Boyer, 2000) and exploration of mountains will begin before that of the night, even as economic agents and municipal authorities will begin to use the latter to « provide a real brand identity so as to compete with Barcelona, London, and Berlin » (Ministère des affaires étrangères et du développement international, 2015). The criss-crossing of « mountain » and « night » as resources is a recent story.

Space-time under pressure

In those territories not yet subject to an extension of day’s domain, the night is nevertheless an exploited resource: we find landscapes transformed by light, ski trails newly illuminated, new kinds of leisure offered, and the growth of night-time amenities to support sports and tourism, which now find themselves represented in new ways, their identities bound to the marketing of nighttime tourism. At the same time, this conquest of the night and the mountain works to reveal the tensions and paradoxes of sustainable development. Mountainous nights provide a rich space-time for research, creativity and experimentation in which we find ourselves obliged to rethink our ways of living and learn new ways of “inhabiting” (in a sense of the latter as involving ways of knowing the world and forms of affective relation rather than an abstract and technocratic approach to space (Dardel, 1952)).

A double movement: the exploitation and preservation of the night

Strategies for developing a touristic night are unfolding around the world, thanks to innovations in lighting, the development of services and activities which extend beyond the day, and tourism policies focused on the dark of night. In China, as Xiang and Bachimon show, we may witness the transformation of certain notable landscapes into nighttime tourist destinations through the use of open-air spectacles whose economic, social, cultural, and environmental impact on local development are not yet fully grasped and throw into question the relationship between the image of place and local identity. Elsewhere, development strategies are taking shape within a *patrimonialization* of the night and of the celestial sky by territorial actors (Challéat, Lapostolle D., Milian, 2018). For tourist destinations looking to distinguish themselves from others by offering unusual attractions (Grèzes, Grèzes, Matos-Wasem, 2018), “*Dark sky tourism*” has become a powerful cause.

Transformations and inventions of the night

In certain regions (Charlier, 2018) we may see an « artialisation » of nighttime celestial landscapes through exhibits of nighttime photography produced in the context of a project to create an international dark sky preserve. An event such as this contributed to the birth of a new “landscape object”. Elsewhere, the mountain night allows for the temporary imagining of alternative forms of collective life, for an existential experiment directed against attempts to control and recuperate night-time practices (Baticle, Hanus, 2018), and for the maintenance of an “oppositional public sphere” (Negt, 2008). Elsewhere still, within the mountain huts used by climbers, nights and mountains become laboratories. They raise questions at the

heart of contemporary architectural debates, such as those having to do with the links between environment, sustainability, efficiency and the management of complex construction sites (Dini R., Girodo S., 2018).

Fundamental tensions

At one and the same time, the mountain night reveals general tensions running through local societies and acts to support and reactivate traditions between tradition and modernity, puritanical orthodoxies and local practices (Bing, 2018). In these tensions, noted by several of the authors here, we find two sets of forces set against each other, each claiming the mantle of radicalism and each offering its own projects of preservation. On the one side, we find those activists struggling to perpetuate an urban nocturnal culture marked by its sociability and roots in transgressive cultural expression (Baticle, Hanus, 2018). The activists engage in resistance against gentrification, nuisance laws and other efforts to cleanse, control and pacify the night. On the other side, we find those forces who seek to protect a natural night of darkness and stellar illumination (Charlier, 2018 ; Challéat, Lapostolle, Milian, 2018). Here, the night is to be valued, not simply as an “ancient” resource in danger of disappearing, but as an antidote to several of the ills of technological modernity: the psycho-physical effects of light pollution on multiple species, the costs (both fiscal and environmental) of artificial illumination, and the loss of any human connection to the supposedly natural cycles of night and day, darkness and light, work and rest. These battles are familiar from the hearts of cities, but they may be found, as well, in mountains and other territories considered “peripheral” to urban life. From the Pyrenees to Java (Bing, 2018), we find moves to render the night « patrimonial » (a heritage) akin to those which have been directed at much less anthropic environments (such as forests) and frequently lead to forms of protection. Here, too, we find the defenders of a primordial experience of the celestial night arrayed against those for whom the “natural” space of the mountain (or the desert or sub-oceanic space) presents opportunities for new forms of experience and spectacularization (Xiang, Bachimon, 2018) intended to attract tourists and other forces of economic development.

A space of stereotypical representations

In the twentieth-century, the sociability of the European mountain became a common motif in popular entertainments, in which stereotypical representations of a mountainous “Middle Europe”, as the playground of spies, illicit lovers and romantic heroes, were common. The night-time socializing of the mountain hotel in Alfred Hitchcock’s film *The Lady Vanishes* (1938) was an occasion for diplomatic espionage among the forces preparing a new World War. By the 1960s, après-ski sequences in the Alps were common features of British Cold War films like *The Double Man* (1967) or the James Bond vehicle *On Her Majesty’s Secret Service* (1969). In both of these, physical battles conducted during sessions of diurnal skiing alternate with scenes of night-time intrigue and betrayal unfolding amidst the festivities of the mountainous night. That night, in such films, is a carrefour of peoples, secrets and diabolical motives, their co-presence in a single place only possible because of the mountain’s distance from the world below. In the mid-1960s, a cycle of pornographic films (like *Après-Ski*, made in Quebec in 1966) made the mountainous night the site of libertine, erotic transgression. In all of these texts, the sublimity of the diurnal, more natural mountain gives way to night-time sociabilities marked by the lowest of human impulses.

Extending the night-realm

The mountainous night is often a tool for broader development strategies. The article by Grèzes, Grèzes and Matos-Wasem is concerned with projects for the protection of the night-time sky. Star parks like those in the Valais (or Pennine) Alps make it possible to revitalize

tourism as part of larger local development strategies, by basing it on amenities like observatories and pathways. In this way, the dynamic systems, links and assemblages of one project may be given value through their links to another, and the results may be directed elsewhere, towards other sites. Projects for using the night, or for converting it into heritage, slide easily towards practices aimed at well-being (see the article by Grèzes). As the result of experiments undertaken in different mountainous regions, as Challéat, Lapostolle and Mililan show, the Nocturnal Environmental Resource (REN, in French) becomes one operator in a transition towards sustainability.

Revealing social tensions

Both night and mountain reveal the human. Exploration of the link between verticality and night leads us into imaginaries and practices which are often opposed : between a space-time to be conquered or effaced and a counter-world to be preserved. The changes undergone by mountain nights on the Island of Java, examined in the article by Bing, likewise reveal, in an often caricatural way, tensions at the heart of the larger society. The case studied here is an extreme one, rich in the practices underlying it and in its imaginary and sacral dimensions: that of night on the Merapi volcano. Bing explores the understudied link between verticality and the night, terms which seem to be rest on contrary imaginaries. He presents us with contrasting “nocturnalities”: on the one hand, the diurnization of practices along urbanized axes; on the other, the persistence of a night-time specificity in villages and zones that have remained rural and/or “natural”. Practices and representations are seen through the framework of conflicts between a puritanical-modernist orthodoxy and local traditions: between nights and mountains as moments and places to be conquered and overcome; and as a counter-world, an indispensable complement to that other world (diurn and anthropized) which opens up potentialities that the latter is unable to offer. The contemporary value assigned to night and mountain is to be rethought, in relation to stakes (ecological, identitarian, etc.) proper to Indonesia. It is possible that “night and nocturnality” will be subject to a patrimonialization similar to that directed at other lightly anthropized milieu (such as forest and mountains) and that this will result in protective measures.

Double identities and “Re-Wilding”

Mountain nights possess a specific festive dimension which allows for the assertion of counter-cultural or rebellious sensibilities (Baticle, Hanus, 2018), of a rebellious culture akin to other utopian movements (Block, 1982) like the *Zones à défendre* (ZAD). This is the case for the « coal festivals » (« fêtes charbonnières ») organized, as the analysis by Baticle and Hanus shows, by «a group of individuals rooted in libertarian culture and/or a radical ecology,” and functioning simultaneously as an oppositional heterotopia vis à vis the daytime life of the valley and a reactivation of protective local figures like the coal miner or the *maquisard*. As Baticle and Hanus suggest, the impulses expressed in these « fêtes” go beyond a simple reinvigoration of nostalgic or traditional pulses: they draw, simultaneously, on medieval legends of forest banditry (Robin des bois), twentieth-century mythologies of the Resistance and the maquis, and a heterogeneous neo-paganism which borrows from both the communal psychedelic rituals of the 1960s and the techno-shamanism of 1990s rave culture. We may even glimpse, in these festivities, links to the “re-wilding” which is at one radical end of current ecological strategies: the effort to preserve natural habitats, not by enclosing them within protective boundaries, but by reinstating older traditions of cyclical destruction and predation.

Between spatial conquest and a new relationship to nature

The dialogue between night and mountain takes many forms. The night is a key moment in the processes of cultural appropriation of mountain tops (Dini R., Girodo S., 2018). The conquest of the mountain passes through the night and its necessary nocturnal rests, and through the deployment of an adapted architecture symbolic of changes at the imaginary level. Dini's analysis of the continuous evolution of shelters built in mountains shows how rest at high altitude and an ongoing colonization of mountains produced a particular way of inhabiting both night and mountain top. The function of mountain climbers' shelters, associated as they were with a traditional sense of the restive night, finds echoes in other types of human conquest (such as those of the desert or the Arctic tundra). These shelters are symbolic markers of a distance vanquished, but they also allow the celestial canopy to be appreciated in aesthetic terms and not simply feared for its darkness.

The double care of mountainous nights

Their character as "double frontier" gives mountain nights a particular status within a logic of sustainable development and in relation to the will to inhabit the world differently. High mountain space allows us to transform potential limits and problems into opportunities, by placing quality before quantity and slowness before frenzy; it leads us to rediscover other cultural models, ones which are "slower, deeper and softer," as well as other ways of sharing space, resources and problems (Dini R., Girodo S., 2018). The fragility of mountain nights, their diversity, the pressures encountered there, and the tensions which cut through them, have rendered them signposts for our societies, advance markers of the changes affecting our planet as a whole. They are chronotopies worth following in thinking about a "nocturnal scene" (Straw, 2014) hitherto imagined only as very urban. To take care of mountain nights is to take care of the world. Beyond this pioneering work on night and mountains, this double engagement requires a commitment to research which is necessarily interdisciplinary in character.

Attali, Granet Bisset, Dalmaso, 2014, *Innovation et territoire de montagne. Le défi de l'approche interdisciplinaire*, Grenoble, PUG.

Bloch E., 1982, *Le principe espérance*, t. II. *Les épures d'un monde meilleur*. Paris, Gallimard.

Besson G., 2011, *La découverte des montagnes du Dauphiné au tournant des Lumières (1760-1820)*, mémoire de Master Sciences humaines et sociales, Grenoble, UPMF.

Boyer M., 2000, *Histoire de l'invention du tourisme, XVIe - XIXe siècle*, La Tour d'Aigue, L'Aube

Brunet R., Ferras R., Theyry H., 1992, *Les Mots de la géographie*, Reclus, La Documentation française, 470 p.

Crary, J., 2013, *24/7, Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. Verso Books.

Dardel E., 1952, *L'Homme et la Terre : nature de la réalité géographique*, Paris, CTHS

Durand G., 1960, *Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire*, Paris, Dunod.

Guichonnet P. (dir.), 1980, *Histoire et civilisation des Alpes*, t.2, Toulouse, Privat-Payot.

Guyot A., 2006, « Le récit de voyage en montagne au tournant des Lumières », in *Société et représentation*, n°21, Paris, 2006.

Gwiazdzinski L., 2003, *La ville 24h/24*, La Tour d'Aigues, L'Aube

Gwiazdzinski L., 2015, The Urban Night: a Space Time for Innovation and Sustainable Development, *Articulo – Journal of urban Research*, volume 11 / 2015, pp. 1-15.

Koslovsky C., 2011, *Evening's Empire*, Cambridge University Press.

22 mesures pour faire de la vie nocturne un facteur d'attractivité touristique à l'international, 2015, Ministère des affaires étrangères, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/feuille_de_route_pole_nuit_finalisee_cle4add54-1.pdf

Negt O., 2008, *L'espace public oppositionnel*, Paris, Payot.

Sloan K., 2017. « Re-Wilding: Cities by Nature. » *The Nature of Cities* <https://www.thenatureofcities.com/2017/04/30/re-wilding-cities-nature/> Consulté le 3 mars 2018.

Straw W., 2014, « Night Scenes / Cenas de Noite », in Collectif, *Manifesto Da Noite/Night Manifesto*, Sao Paulo, 2014, p. 104-113.

Straw W., 2017, « Penser la nuit », In Gwiazdzinski Luc, 2016, *La nuit, dernière frontière de la ville*, Paris, Rhuthmos, pp.7-10

Citer cet article :

Luc Gwiazdzinski et Will Straw, « Nights and Mountains. Preliminary Explorations of a Double Frontier », *Journal of Alpine Research | Revue de géographie alpine* [En ligne], 106-1 | 2018, mis en ligne le 07 avril 2018, consulté le 18 avril 2018. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/rga/3979>

(*) **Luc Gwiazdzinski** is a geographer and Director of the Master Innovation et territoire at the University of Grenoble Alpes. He has organized over twenty colloquium and research projects on night and urban temporalities. He is the author of numerous articles and books on these issues, including: *La nuit dernière frontière de la ville* (L'aube) ; *la Ville 24h/24* (L'Aube) ; *La Nuit en questions* (Hermann) ; *Nuits d'Europe* (UTBM), *L'hybridation des mondes* (Elya) ; *Chronotopies* (Elya).

(*) **Will Straw** is James McGill Professor of Urban Media Studies in the Departement of Art History and Communications Studies at McGill University (Canada). He is the author of over 150 articles on popular music, cinema and urban culture. It is the co-editor of *Circulation and the city : Essays on Urban Culture* (Mc Gill-Queens University Press, 2010) and has directed several research projects on media, urban culture and the night.

