

# Who Owns the Night?

An Interview With Will Straw

*By Catherine Guesde*

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**The way nightlife has been affected by the recent Covid-19 restrictions invites us to think back on the value and features of the night as we have known it for most of our lives. A pioneer in the burgeoning field of night studies, Will Straw sheds light on the history of the night and the issues related to its loss.**

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**Will Straw** is Professor of Urban Media Studies at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec. He is the author of *Cyanide and Sin: Visualizing Crime in 50s America* (Andrew Roth Gallery, 2006) and co-editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Rock and Pop* (with Simon Frith and John Street, 2001), *Circulation and the City: Essays on Urban Culture* (with Alexandra Boutros, 2010), *Formes Urbaines* (with Anouk Bélanger and Annie Gérin, 2014), and *Night Studies: Regards croisés sur les nouveaux visages de la nuit* (Grenoble: Editions Elya, 2020.) He has published over 170 articles on music, cinema, popular culture and the urban night. His writings on media and the night include “Chrono-Urbanism and Single-Night Narratives in Film” (*Film Studies*, Spring 2015), and “Media and the Urban Night” (*Articulo – Journal of Urban Research*, 2015). He is currently completing a book on the sensational press in New York City in the 1920s and 1930s. His website, [The Urban Night](#), provides daily links to news about the urban night.

**Books & Ideas: You are a pioneer in the field of night studies. How did this field emerge? Is there a common agreement on the definition its object among those who think about the night from a natural sciences perspective, and those who study it from the standpoint of the human sciences?**

**Will Straw:** The question of how “night studies” emerged as a field is an interesting one. There has been a long history of people thinking and writing about the night, of course, from the poets of romanticism through historians of night-time entertainment. Something we could call “night studies”, quite surprisingly, has emerged only very recently. It became a field when a few adventurous authors decided to think about the night in its entirety, to conceptualize it as an object to be dissected in its multiple dimensions. By this, I mean that such authors approached the night as if it were something of which we should ask the most basic questions: is the night simply a time, or might we imagine it as a space—a territory—as well? Do concepts of legality and citizenship apply in equal measure to people in the day as in the night? Are nights becoming more full or more empty of activity, information, people?

In the Anglophone world, it is common to speak of the 1978 article by the American sociologist Murray Melbin, “The Night as Frontier,” as one of the first attempts to think about the night in its totality. As the title of Melbin’s article suggests, he brought, to sociological reflection upon the night, a geographical notion, that of frontier. In what was perhaps a characteristically American perspective on the night he asked whether, if spatial frontiers had more or less been overcome by the expansionary movements of colonialism and settlement, we might see the night as a new “territory” for economic investment and human activity.

But, almost simultaneously, the French philosopher and art historian Anne Cauquelin, in 1977, published the marvellous book *La ville la nuit*, which I really think should be considered as one of the foundational works of this field. In *La ville la nuit*, I sometimes argue, we see all the major themes and many of the key methods of “night studies” anticipated, some twenty or thirty years before they would serve as the foundations of a recognizable new field. This book is a veritable encyclopedia of methods for analyzing the night: it contains lists of locations in Paris which are illuminated at night, maps of nocturnal activity at different times of the night, analyses of night-time transit and its availability, and lengthy reflections on the morality and legality of night-time behaviors. The book was published in a series bearing the title “La politique éclatée” and one of the significant contributions of this book is that it

invites us to consider many of the ways in which the night is governed, and the multiple reasons why the night is political.

The publication of a third book, *La nuit, dernière frontière de la ville*, by the geographer Luc Gwiazdzinski, was more contemporary with my own growing interest in the night, and it had an enormous impact on me. It served to “authorize,” if you like, my own sense that a coherent field of research was emerging. Like Cauquelin, Gwiazdzinski demonstrates a variety of methodological tools one might use to analyze the night, from a sociology of labour to the tradition of what is sometimes called “time geography.” I had read Gwiazdzinski’s book before finally meeting him in person, in 2014, and our various collaborations since have been of enormous value to me.

We can only speak of a field when, in the 2010s, historians writing about the night begin to refer to geographers or to urbanists writing about the night, or when those writing about literary representations of the night refer to all of those—that is, when we find a sense of community taking shape across several disciplines. And a field is really only a field when it has the institutional supports which have exploded in the next 10 years—the international conferences of night studies, the major interdisciplinary research projects, the thematic issues of journals and so on. Watching all of this take place has been one of the most unexpected and marvellous aspects of my recent life as a researcher. One effect of this new self-consciousness of “night studies” as a possible field has been a quite rapid politicization of our understanding of the night: it is more and more difficult to think of the night in strictly aesthetic or economic terms, for example, without taking into account questions of gender insecurity in the night, or the precarity of night-time labour. The interdisciplinary character of present-day discussions of the night have brought a wide variety of issues into a shared space of recognition and reflection.

**Books & Ideas: Has the pandemic creates new areas of concern for night studies? Are you aware of any studies that have emerged from the context of the pandemic?**

**Will Straw:** When the pandemic arrived, it became the focus of two communities for whom the future of the night had recently become a matter of intense concern. One such community consisted of all of those officials, night time entrepreneurs, activists and associations whose work centres on the night. For many of these people, the two years before the arrival of the pandemic had already been years of crisis. Conflicts over gentrification in cities were intensifying and were very often centred on so-called nuisances of the night, like the noise of festive crowds in city centres. These people

spent the first year of the pandemic attempting to protect or restructure the night-time cultural life which remained, and speculating as to what a post-COVID night might be. We may point to a series of proposals, like the Global Nighttime Recovery Plan, which were the result of collaboration between consultants, administrators of night-life, activists in the domain of night-time culture and creative workers.

Another community is made up of those working as researchers in the academic field of night studies. Many of us have been invited to write articles for blogs or news media, and to write the chapter “pandemic nights” for collective works dealing with the pandemic in a comprehensive fashion. The coincidence of the rapid rise of “night studies” in recent years and the “closing” of the night during the pandemic has produced a great deal of interesting reflection on how the night of our cities or communities might be re-imagined. For example, might we imagine a festive, cultural night which takes place in smaller, more dispersed locations within cities, rather than in the mega-festivals and crowded downtowns of the pre-pandemic city?

**Books & Ideas: Before night studies emerged as a field, you were known for your work on popular culture—music and cinema. Did studying those objects from the prism of night studies allow you to renew some of these reflections?**

**Will Straw:** Like Molière’s *bourgeois gentilhomme*, who spoke prose without knowing it, I realize that, in my earlier work on music scenes, clubbing and so on, I was doing night studies without being aware that I was doing so. At the same time, in my parallel career as a researcher on cinema, I was drawn to those forms of popular culture—le film noir, police narratives, and so on, which were centred on representations of the night-time city. Almost from the very beginning of my career, I have been fascinated by that popular aesthetic which the French author and screenwriter Pierre Mac Orlan called “the social fantastic,” the aesthetic of the mysterious and nocturnal city.

In the study of popular music, in which I published some of my earliest research, I was one of those who proposed the concept of “scene” as a way of describing the forms of collective life in which music was embedded. “Scene,” we argued, was less restrictive than earlier concepts such as “sub-culture,” which imagined that people pursued their musical tastes within quite rigid social boundaries. When we speak of poetry scenes or dark metal scenes or drag culture scenes, we are speaking of loose, fluid assemblages of people, places and tastes, rather than closed worlds devoted to single genres or styles of culture. As the concept of scene developed in popular music studies, one tendency, which I tried to encourage, was to see scenes

as sites of urban sociability. Scenes, we might say, are the supplements of sociability which attach themselves to particular cultural practices, and, inasmuch as this sociability is likely to transpire at night, scenes constitute one of the ways in which cultural practice takes its place within the broader effervescence of the night-time life of cities.

**Books & Ideas: Is the night, as we knew it before the beginning of the pandemic, a recent “invention”? And do the current restrictions due to Covid-19—curfews, lockdowns—involve a return to the past as far as the night is concerned?**

**Will Straw:** Certainly, we may trace the origins of the modern night to the illumination of cities at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The electric lighting of cities not only made it possible for populations to go out and enjoy the night-time of cities, but it also rendered this night-time activity public and visible. Historians will trace that process by which the bourgeoisie and upper-classes, of societies around the world, moved out of their private enclaves and into the public spaces of cabarets, theatres and restaurants. The very meanings of the night are historical phenomena, produced by the interplay of technology, the structure of social classes and the organization of urban space. It is when the spectacle of the night is dominated by the view of others enjoying the night, when we go out to see other people, whom we have probably never met... this is the modern night of cities.

To the extent that this spectacle of others enjoying the night has not been available to us, during the pandemic, we may say that the night has been newly interiorized within domestic space. However, the main difference between pandemic nights and those of the pre-modern era is that our nights at home are now devoted to entertainment and forms of interpersonal communication which arrive in our homes along networks of information. Our “domestic” nights are, in many respects, nights of spectacle and long-distance communication; this is one important difference between the present and the pre-modern era. In many respects, the nights we spend with our devices involve higher levels of interconnection than our days.

**Books & Ideas: With the pandemic and the curfews, it seems the nights have grown longer—we are home earlier—while night cultures tend to disappear. What do we lose when we lose the night?**

**Will Straw:** What we have lost is the sense of the night as a time/space of discovery. Virtually all of my interactions during the pandemic have been with people I already know—my neighbours, whom I see briefly on the street, the people with whom I communicate on Zoom or through social media. The dynamism of constantly expanding networks and social groups has been lost. So, too, has the sense of encountering the vitality of city life in its experimental forms: the music one finds by chance in a club, the transgressive communities (artistic, sexual, political) who, in a pre-pandemic world, marked particular spaces of the night.

To be sure, I can find all kinds of culture, transgressive or traditional, on line. But my discovery of them is not tied to my journeys through the night-time life of the city in which I live, or to the sociability which marks such journeys. Rather, these forms of culture are reduced to circumscribed options organized within the offerings of media platforms.

The return of a certain clandestinity has reduced the political status of the person to its most basic, biological forms: a body does not have the right to be out at night, for any purpose (beyond those which are considered acceptable or essential.) At the same time, as anyone who has looked down a street after curfew will note, the city has become a more space which is no longer familiar to us. The rare human being in movement seems like an animal seeking shelter; every look between people is a look of suspicion or fear.

**Books & Ideas: Do the changes that night has undergone lately contribute to reinforcing certain inequalities—in particular around the issue of night work, but perhaps also as far as gender is concerned?**

**Will Straw:** The very rules which govern confinement or curfew, in my city [Montreal] and in so many others, make a distinction between those for whom there is no need to be out at night and others, so-called “essential workers,” who are given the right to work at night. For the first, the night is a time of luxury, and that luxury may be taken away, temporarily. For the others, work is necessary and so it will be allowed to continue. We face the particular paradox: that those whose work is considered most essential are also those whose work is considered to have less value, in economic and social terms. I refer here to the drivers of public transport vehicles, the workers in the health sector, the factory workers and others, who are allowed to work in the night (which means, in fact, that their employers have the right to insist that they work at night.)

The first inequality of the pandemic, then, has to do with social class. But, of course, in a society like that in which I live, those who perform this “essential” (but under-valued work) are typically immigrants, people of colour, and women. You only have to look at the passengers of urban transport systems during the pandemic, late at night or early in the morning, to see that these are not the inhabitants of a festive night. When the festive noctambules are removed, the image which remains is that of the support workers who have no choice but to confront risks which the rest of us may avoid.

It may be the case that, with curfews and confinements, the traditional insecurity faced by women at night has been diminished. But it is in the intersections of gender, class and ethnicity—in the decisions we make between those whose work is “essential” (but nevertheless under-valued) and those for whom it is not (who may nevertheless continue to receive their professional salaries while working from home)—that these inequalities have revealed themselves most starkly.

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