

Dorp

The Night Delivered of Stars

Kristina Stallvik

Night; white, sleepless night—such is the disaster: the night lacking darkness, but brightened by no light. Limitless space where a sun would attest not to the day, but to the night delivered of stars. In that night heavy with the absence of the world, thought watches. What I know is that such a wake permits neither waking nor sleeping. It leaves thought outside of any secret, deprives it of all intimacy, bereft of self, to become lost in the other night, oppressive night (the empty, the ever dispersed and fragmented, the foreign night). In this night there are no longer any terms, there is no longer a relation, no longer a beyond—in this night God himself has annulled himself.

— Maurice Blanchot, *Writing the Disaster*

It is so dark here at night. When it is dark like this, it is also very light. When there are no street lights and a big open sky you can really see how much light that big open sky makes ... the stars still can reach me. They take the form of blurred circles.

— Lauren Cook, *I Love Shopping*

The eye is composed of two distinct light receiving geometries: day time cones that see exacting, chromatic detail, and night time rods that sense nocturnal gestures in loose, grayscale notions. 55 million years ago our mammal ancestors lost their ability to see in the dark. When the earth's climate afforded nutrient dense flowering plants, evolution spun its trick and most rods in the proto humanoid retina traded for cones. Now we pick fruits understood as blue, red, orange, pink, from trees understood as green. The subject needed to separate from the background; we began to experience our habitat as a picture, our sky as a color field. But this capitulation to perceptibility was exhausting, and circadian rhythms opted for long periods of rest during the hours of darkness.

Art historian Jonathan Crary characterises sleep as the last vestige of a pre-capital existence. During The Industrial Revolution, philosophical thinking began to adopt Cartesian understandings of sleep, along with other afflictions of the body, as an obstacle towards knowledge. In Walter Benjamin's unfinished work *Arcades Project*, he writes of sleeping as an inherently communal act; the "sleeping collective" must decide together their moment of historical awakening—when to decipher the shared dream-images generated during rest. Wakefulness provides the pretence for a body politic (or as Levinas postulates, radical depersonalisation) yet runs the risk of plunging the exhausted subject into self absorption instead. In its inability to be instrumentalised, *sleep* maintains the cartilage of sociality. This daily alternation of antinomial exigencies strings together in a syncopated rhythm, stress placed on the presumed 'weak' beat of sleep. It sounds like confusion, joy, vibration, stagnation, incompatibility with the conditions demanded by contemporary forms of labor. As Crary writes, "the scandal of sleep is the embeddedness in our lives of the oscillations between work and recuperation that have been neutralised elsewhere. A 24/7 world is a disenchanted one in its eradication of shadows and obscurity and of alternate temporalities. It is a world identical to itself, a world with the shallowest of pasts, and thus in principle without spectres." The state of sleep refuses to be accessed; it is fundamentally incapable of being folded into the logic of modernity. An exploitation of sleep must be synonymous with the annihilation of both its necessity and its domain: the night.

Last month, The American Federal Communications Commission granted their approval for California start-up Reflect Orbital to launch a solar mirror¹ into the thermosphere—a satellite angled to bounce sunlight back to the dark side of the earth like an artificially gyrating hyper moon. Activated on-demand from an app, individual customers can instantaneously flood a 5 kilometre radius for one hour rental units. This light of a 24/7 world is strictly engineered to not spill out of the service area. It illuminates a homogeneous present, presuming "an apparent equivalence between what is immediately available, accessible, or utilisable, and what exists." An insomniatic flattening of construction sites, emergencies, film sets, crop fields, urban sidewalks, public spectacles. The sharp edges of an event are produced by this fraudulent brightness, preempting any semblance of unknowability. The pupil is immobilised in a retracted state. It does not dilate in the variable darkness between oblong ellipses cast by earth bound fixtures. The blips of color from ground level TVs and the iridescent green cross or Hygeian Bowl of the pharmacy, and the brief moment of a flint wheel under the thumb (and their inverted afterimages like individual pixels not quite dying under the eyelids) are scorched out. Seeing everything supersedes the not seeing of some things; the asymptotic unfurling of curiosity is obliterated, too.

Unassisted, the post Eocene human retina takes up to two hours to undergo complete “dark adaptation,” the process required to shift sensitivity of visual perception from sunlight to scotopic (low light) conditions. This waning interval is populated by prolonged looking, haptic pursuits. Touching to see and imagining what cannot be touched or seen. During the Vietnam War, scientists discovered the quantum mechanical basis for technologically assisted night vision. In a technique called “image intensification,” small amounts of ambient light from celestial bodies are sent through an accelerating vacuum and transferred into electrons that reinscribe the dark world on a glowing screen. The starlight scope: an immediacy bestowed from the heavens, tested on soldiers, and implemented amongst civilian surveillance, recreational hunting, wildlife biology, and police activity. The night sky lacking darkness reflects back earthly impatience, obliging in atrocities.

Tess Wei’s tonal paintings and graphite works steal away space, holding rectangular parcels of it in the dark. To “see” them is to locate one’s self within a sensitive matrix of emission and reception. The retina, the canvas, the photon. Angles of relation between body, object, and source of illumination, fluctuate in a process of orientation that grants the work its temporary forms. Wei’s surfaces of sandpaper, graphite, sand, wax, and oil compose the full sky, the intimate night. An LED ceiling track light like a trail of stars. Iridescent glints catch on irregularities, a means of wayfinding for the eye, visible only in the blue purple darkness.

¹ Reflect Orbital named its inaugural satellite Eärendil-1, after a half elf from the Lord of the Rings who sails a ship into the heavens with a gemstone strapped to his forehead. He becomes the Evening Star. When the namesake satellite reaches 500 kilometres above the earth’s crust, it will unfurl an ultra thin sheet of space-grade plastic, coated in aluminium to cast daylight towards such navigational landmarks only visible in the dark of the night sky.

Works cited:

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

Blanchot, Maurice. *The Writing of the Disaster*. Translated by Ann Smock, University of Nebraska Press, 1995.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Harvard University Press, 1999