



# Glittering Lights

## Nocturnal Atmospheres and the Modern Metropolis

What is a nocturnal atmosphere? We can arrive at an accurate description of this nebulous concept by firstly considering the inherent change brought about by the onset of night. Our understanding of the environment changes with the darkening hours, as solid forms once seen with clarity become oblique shadows. Visibility is diminished; the eye deceives, and there is increased ambiguity of perception in the night, an effect prominently felt at dusk, when forms and movements are dismissed as a mere “trick of the light”. The human eye can adjust to sudden extremes of brightness and darkness, yet seeing through the darkness is beyond our evolutionary reach. With such ambiguity comes uncertainty: nocturnal atmospheres are in part defined by a fear of the unknown, and the potential dangers the darkness may conceal. It is no coincidence that pre-industrial, folkloric superstitions are claimed to occur during night-time hours: in essence, darkness provides the same cloaking for the supernatural as the criminal. The nocturnal atmosphere of the modern metropolis naturally diverges from that of rural locations, in which a greater depth of darkness exists, with fewer artificial illuminations. We are biologically diurnal beings, but socially we have adapted to extend our living into the darkness by illumination, permitting shift work in industrialised centres and the organised commodification of leisure time. Moreover, the presence of light in darkness creates a new feeling in the urban space, and a heightened awareness of the shifting atmospheres at the boundaries of day and night.

<

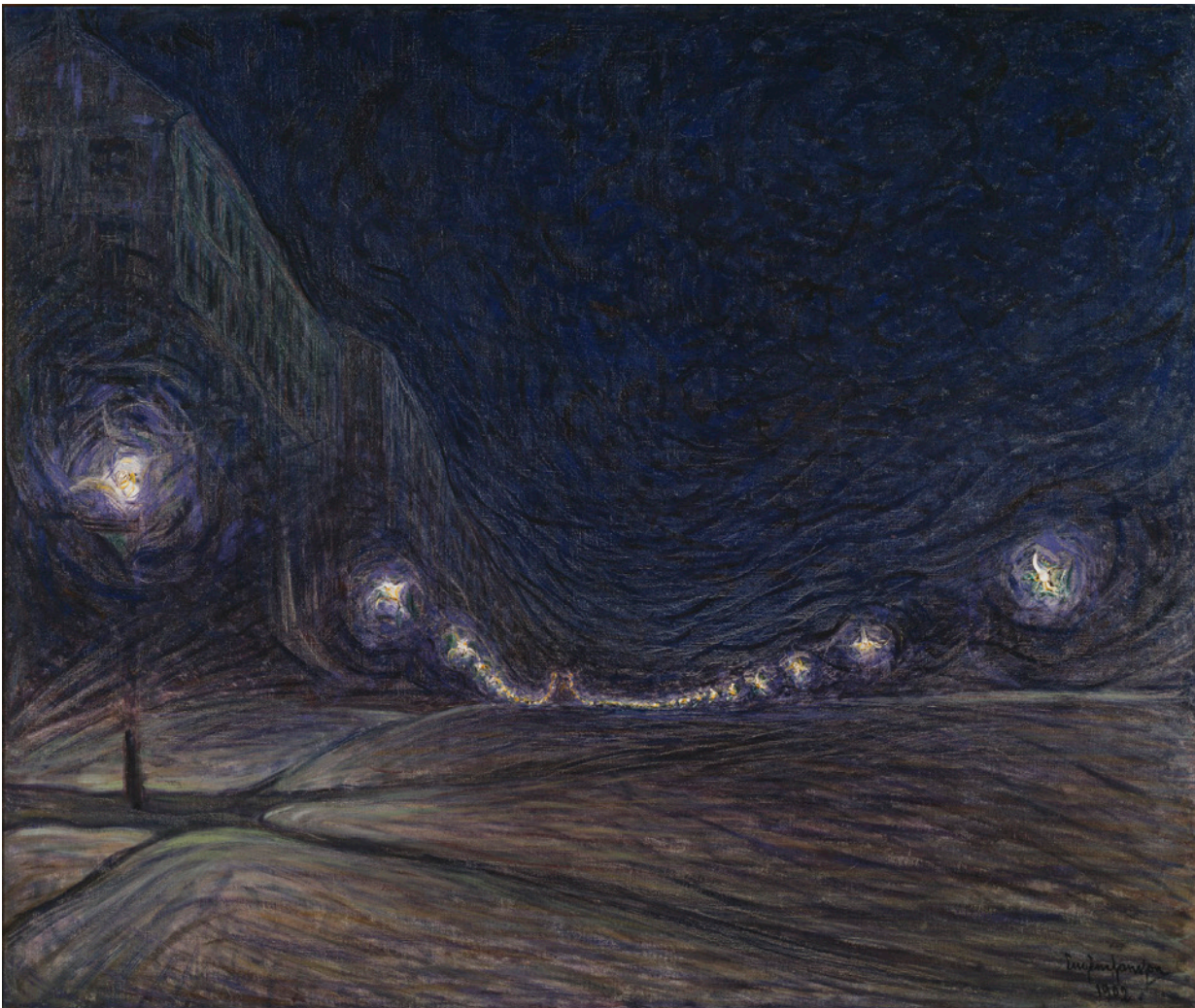
Lesser Ury: *Potsdam Square by Night*, c. 1925 (detail). Oil on canvas, 79.6 x 100 cm. The Israel Museum Jerusalem © The Israel Museum Jerusalem by Avshalom Avital.

With this in mind, we can begin to align the term “atmosphere” at the nexus of body and space. Atmosphere is equated with the mood or feeling perceived by the individual but derived from the surrounding space, a “sustained being in a situation, rather than a singular moment of perception” (Pallasmaa 2014, 20). Ascribing qualities such as “good” or “bad” to atmosphere implies a judgement of temperamentality to spatial experiences. Atmosphere is porous and subject to change, not only due to the individual’s mood, but to the changing topology of spaces, particularly in urban environments where the dynamism of the street provides a constantly shifting tableau against the static canvas of built material. There is a further meteorological connotation of atmosphere, pertaining to air, gases, fog, smoke, fumes. Vapours permeate our being, infiltrating the body to sustain or damage life, expelled into the atmosphere again to the extent that a “change in the air” directly affects the body (Horn 2018, 13; Ingold 2012, 83). The porosity of atmosphere and body is manifested in the act of breathing, in which vapours are internalised and exhaled anew. Entering a space, we “breathe in” its atmosphere, absorbing its effects in the body, and the resulting mood is determined by the individual’s reaction to external stimuli. As an essentially haptic phenomena, spatial perception requires the participation of all senses as “specialisations of the skin” (Pallasmaa 2007, 42); but as a visual phenomenon, glittering light necessitates an ocularcentric perspective on the subject of nocturnal atmospheres, though the feeling it procures is not bound by vision but the body.

This article examines the role of the glittering urban streetlight in art c. 1900-1920 in shaping nocturnal atmospheres, drawing on contemporary aesthetic theories of atmosphere as the feeling that is simultaneously of the space, and a construct of individual perception. Symbolists convey alienation and anonymity in urban centres, where figuration is eradicated to examine the abandoned city as a site of nocturnal introspection beneath glowing streetlights. In the Expressionist idiom, streetlights represent the emotional intensity of the metropolis, emphasising the role of light in shaping transactional spaces. The glittering lights of the metropolis have defined the dynamic between the individual and urban space, stirring emotions, ideas, and desires. The artifice of illumination permits access, casting light into the darkness. Streetlights bring the intimacy of the interior into the public sphere and the commodification of leisure, with the brash lights of consumerism denoting “open for business”. Glass, mirrors, and rainy pavements provide reflective surfaces to multiply the dazzling effect of light, inviting the eye and igniting imagination. However, for there to be shine, there must exist its dark antagonist, the shadow. Light carves a separate space within

the darkness, its significance heightened by a delimiting contrast (Böhme 2020, 88). These glittering lights spark debate on a number of dichotomies: inside-outside, public-private, work-leisure, artifice-nature. Even the term “nightlife” suggests a duality, in which the individual undergoes an implicit transformation between diurnal and nocturnal personae, intertwined with the concept of flâneur as passive urban observer.

Atmosphere is predicated on the fall of light within a scene, imbuing it with emotive potential to the extent that we are “tuned in a particular way by a particular lighting” (Böhme 2020, 156). Light is a phenomenon, but it is also architecture. Our sensitivity to light ranges from poetic truth to the physicality of blinding brightness, with the power to affect at a visceral level. The innate feelings brought about by a change in the light underscores the significance of light and its sources in the architectural creation of spaces (Böhme 2020, 144). A dazzling display illuminates the metropolitan night, emanating from street-lamps, shop lights, café signs, and their reflections on surfaces. Light transforms its surrounding objects through bright illumination, or paradoxical shadowing. Glittering lights create an atmosphere that is characteristically nocturnal through this dichotomy of revelation and concealment, a tension that defines the experience of darkness, but also of space. Gernot Böhme distinguishes two types of lighting relevant to our context: that of “brilliant lights”, which obscure their object, and the “faint shimmer”, which diffuses surrounding contours (2020, 155). This difference is illustrated in Józef Pankiewicz’s *Warsaw Cab at Night* (1893, National Museum, Kraków). Every surface of the rainy street glistens with reflections, including the image of a lantern in the cobblestones. The “faint shimmers” are evident in the blurring of the distant streets, as well as the foreground, seen through a haze. The distant lights emit a yellow glow in the thick mist, yet the forms they illuminate are indistinguishable. A “brilliant light” is located in the carriage lantern. This light does not glow or illuminate the carriage, but casts it into deeper shadow, extending from the centre to the left corner of the pictorial space. In an otherwise abandoned street, the implied presence of the carriage driver and occupants embeds the scene with a psychological ambiguity compounded by the ghostly gleam of the horse. At once unclear and dazzling, the nocturnal atmosphere emerges from this partial revelation of forms, derived from the multiplication of light by reflection, and moulded by the atmospheric conditions.



**[1]** Eugène Jansson: *Hornsgatan by Night*, 1902. Oil on canvas, 152 x 182 cm. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm.

### **Jansson: Streetlight as Cleared Space**

Contrasts are sharpened by night. We define our “being in” a space by our relation to light, so to step out of the lantern’s glow into the shadows of the street is to move from visibility to concealment, from publicity to privacy. The Swedish artist Eugène Jansson conveys the intense isolation of nocturnal hours in *Hornsgatan by Night* **[1]**, the Södermalm street bulging with snowfall. Jansson’s textural brushstrokes meld into an impenetrable atmospheric thickness, the blue depths disrupted only by the chain of glittering lights guiding the eye into a seemingly infinite pictorial space. The Symbolist proclivity for the paradox of the “abandoned city” is rooted in the alienating quality of the modern metropolis: in place of this reality, Jansson eradicates the presence of the daytime’s teeming crowd to forge a dreamlike, imagined city, its atmosphere shaped by shadow and light.

The dynamic between light and darkness is symbiotic; one is antithetical to the other. Shadows and lights each create space; in the case of nocturnal atmospheres, streetlights extend into the void, so that shadows enclose light's spatiality. In the presence of surrounding darkness, the streetlight becomes a spatial and social node. We can borrow Böhme's term of *gelichteter Raum*, or "cleared space", in order to examine its significance. Amidst the shadows of the night, the streetlight in the left foreground of *Hornsgatan by Night* illuminates an area or "clearing" which is demarcated by its definite borders of darkness. This clearing becomes a defined space which allows for both bodily and optical movement, establishing a sense of depth and distance; however, such clearings of light may also be perceived from beyond this limited space as external objects (Böhme 2020, 149-150). This latter perception of "light as space" is located in painted representations of the night. In such instances, light and its source become perceivable objects in the work, rooted in imagination rather than a bodily, "real life" phenomena. In terms of artificial light, the effect of a streetlamp is one of glow, a soft wreath around the source of light from smoke or fog, blurring the perception of depth. The atmospheric qualities of vagueness and ambiguity are derived from the light and air in Jansson's work. Atmosphere is ultimately immersive: fog thickens the air, its density diffusing the streetlights as a glow amidst the shadow. Concealing architectural forms in the half-light circumvents literal transcription, and instead stirs the imagination to sense the experience through the unfocused haze of peripheral vision (Pallasmaa 2007, 50), evoking the feeling of "being in" the urban night.

The clichéd feeling of loneliness in a crowd is directly derived from the independence afforded individuals in the modern metropolis, an aspect lacking in smaller communities who must defend against behaviours transgressive to their beliefs and values. This personal freedom is inherently bound up with the emergence of leisure and nightlife, and the implied shift from diurnal to nocturnal personae. German sociologist Georg Simmel notes that "the intellectual conditions for life in large social units are never more sharply appreciated in their significance for the independence of the individual than in the dense crowds of the metropolis because the bodily closeness and lack of space make intellectual distance really perceivable for the first time" (1971, 334). The act of walking the street is not merely one of intense proximity to the massing crowds and architectural fabric, but also one of spectacle, with Walter Benjamin's city walker losing himself to the "monotonous, fascinating, constantly unrolling band of asphalt" (2003, 519). Space too becomes a corporeal presence, in which the haptic qualities of "bodily closeness" and "lack of space" directly mould the spatial atmos-

phere, leading to the eradication of boundaries between self and space, to the extent that Charles Baudelaire's flâneur, despite his passivity, strives to be "one flesh with the crowd" (1995, 9). These aspects convey the sensory overload of the urban experience as external stimulus, but also the porosity of body and atmosphere – the tactility of not merely *walking* the street, but *sensing* the city as a living organism. Where the suffocation of proximity appears to reign, the opposites

of "bodily distance" and "abundance of space" coexist within the modern metropolis. The glittering lights of the city bear witness to individual actions that might otherwise go unnoticed, but these lights also take centre stage not for the purpose of illumination, but as sites of rumination. The lights in Jansson become substitutes for the crowd, forming a presence of their own in the abandoned city street.

### Spilliaert: Atmosphere in the Symbolist City

We use terms like "evocative" or "introspective" to describe a scene such as Belgian Symbolist Léon Spilliaert's *Promenade, Light Reflections* [2] – precisely which emotions this work might evoke in the individual is inconsequential to the fact that it is *evocative*. Provoking the imagination is inherent to Symbolist art, to the extent that visual representation is almost always metaphorical. Indicated only

by a single sparkling dot in the shadows, Spilliaert's streetlamps share the physiognomy of glitter, but do not form a cleared space the viewer can enter. Their presence is illusory; reflections cannot be occupied, but are snatched away with the slightest vicissitude of light. The fact that this scene is depicted as a nocturne rather than in the full clarity of daylight is further testament to the evocative potential inherent in extremes of brightness and shadow. Since Romanticism, the twilight and night have been associated with daydreaming, melancholic



[2] Léon Spilliaert: *Promenade, Light Reflections*, 1908. Indian ink wash, brush, coloured pencil on paper, 480 x 394 mm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris © Musée d'Orsay, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Patrice Schmidt.

solitude, and the sublime. The seaside promenade typically associated with the act of walking is now devoid of its daytime leisure trade, and estranged from its conventional appearance.

As with all reflections, there is a fundamental dichotomy of original and illusion, mediated by the reflective surface. In Spilliaert's work, the promenade along the sea becomes a site of introspection in a delicate play between reality and fiction. Unless in a mirror, reflections are not typically duplications, or symmetrical. More common is the distorted reflection of lights upon other surfaces, which reveal not only the texture of that surface, but its form and positioning in relation to the light source. These reflections in turn play a part in defining the surrounding space. Useful in our interpretation is Henri Lefebvre's discussion of the mirror's reflection, in which the Ego regards its own "material presence" (1991, 185). In the absence of the mirror's smooth duplication, the reflection on Spilliaert's promenade (which itself must be covered by a layer of water) transcends its representation to become a motif of existential rumination: "the surface of water symbolises the surface of consciousness and the material (concrete) process of decipherment which brings what is obscure forth into the light" (Lefebvre 1991, 186). This notion is made all the more prominent by the fact that glittering lights shine brighter in shadow, with the oscillation between obscurity and clarity describing the duality of existence. The internal dialogue of the self is embodied in these glittering lights, in which the self and perception of the self (the reflection) are presented in a distorted doubling.

While the reflection is not a "mirror-image" duplicate, its distortion serves to underscore the estrangement of body and soul. Such an effect calls to mind the *Doppelgänger*, the doubling of the self in a shadow or reflection as memento mori, and motif of the uncanny (Freud 2003, 142; Rank 1979). A splintering of the self, Spilliaert's lights appear "overshadowed" by the visual dominance of their precarious reflections, near but never touching. In many ways, light and its reflection echo the words of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in which the body "sees itself seeing; it touches itself touching; it is visible and sensitive for itself" (1993, 294). As embodiments of the self, these lights turn the nocturnal atmosphere from outward experience of the urban night to inward contemplation of mortality. The Symbolist tendency toward ambiguity, introspection, and mood is closely aligned with the phenomenology of atmosphere, each treading the line between tangibility and abstraction: Symbolist artists seek to articulate abstract ideas by obtuse yet representational means; conversely, atmosphere is the transfiguration of a given space (or pictorial space) into an abstract feeling or emotion.



### **Kirchner: Lights, Nightlife, and Leisure**

The atmosphere of the city – specifically the nocturnal city – is defined not merely by the external environment, but by the individual inhabitants of that space. In his account of metropolitan living, Simmel indicates the prevalence of a “blasé attitude” due to an overstimulation of the nerves from the endlessly changing, frenetic pace of urban life, in which monetary value is the only distinguishing quality of a thing (1971, 330). A “rapid telescoping of changing images” assaults the individual with visual information which requires more intellectual energy to process, by contrast to the slower pace of rural life, dominated instead by emotional relationships (1971, 325). This translates into a hardened personality and “matter-of-factness”, in which the city becomes a transactional space of individuals working not with personal relationships, but with mere *numbers*.

The city comprises not merely visual noise, but voices, transportation and the sounds of industry. An inherently haptic space, the individual touches and is touched by every surface of the city. There is corporeal proximity to others in a crowd, handrails and seating directly engage the body, goods are handled prior to purchase, food and drink is tasted and consumed, bodily pleasure is for sale. Transactions form an essential, tactile experience of the city, and even the money with which they are conducted must physically exchange hands. The sensory overload of the industrialised centre is encapsulated in *Street Noise* (1920, Berlinische Galerie) by *Novembergruppe* member Otto Möller. Fragments of advertising, transportation, and the built environment collide in a dense visual cacophony of the city. The conical motifs may symbolise the endless crescendos of passing traffic, or equally, shafts of streetlight which “pollute” the urban environment by eradicating the natural boundaries between day and night.

Ludwig Meidner’s instructions for painting Berlin in 1914 convey much of the social anxiety and visual bombardment associated with life in the modern metropolis. Consigning the Impressionist preoccupation with pure light to academia, Meidner instead calls for focus on “weight, darkness, and static matter” (1970, 112). The violence of his apocalyptic visions of Berlin embody the alienation of the mechanised city, underscoring the significance of light as an atmospheric motif in which “light explodes over a confused jumble of buildings. Between moving vehicles light flashes. [...] Light sets everything in motion. The towers, houses, lanterns appear suspended or swimming in air” (1970, 112). Similarly, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner discusses a concept akin to atmosphere in his perception of the Berlin metropolis, also noting the visual impact of rapid, fleeting lights of vehicles, and the “feeling” of the city manifested in the linear movement of people and transport in *Kraftlinien*, or “lines of force” – capturing these “unfa-

miliar effects” required a new visual idiom of Expressionism (Haxthausen 1987, 66-67). Both Expressionists indicate the overwhelming sensation of glittering lights, emblematic not only of leisure, but of speed and motion as new urban experiences.

The organisation of metropolitan life is dictated by time, to the extent that Simmel surmises a temporary disruption to the punctuality of Berlin’s clocks would trigger far-reaching economic consequences (1971, 328). If timekeeping defines the business day, then lights counteract the “close of business” by extending its remit into the night hours. This “after hours” becomes a night economy, where darkness is no longer the natural marker of the day’s end, but the beginning of a new shift, a transition from diurnal to nocturnal activity. The alignment of nightlife and leisure is both enabled and symbolised by the street-light, to the extent that Dolf Sternberger describes the “urban night itself, thanks to general illumination, [as] a kind of permanent, exciting festivity” (1977, 175).

If the illumination of the city street signals the opening of nocturnal transactions, then it also blurs the boundary between private and public. The individual undergoes a metamorphosis from “daylife” to “nightlife”, in which the rubrics of the private and the personal are transposed from the shelter of the domestic sphere to the openness of the city street as a site of transaction between individuals. Lights and leisure coalesce in the ubiquitous usage of the red light to signify brothels and prostitution. The “clocking on” of the nocturnal persona is indicated by a police statement issued for the regulation of prostitution in Paris in 1830: “Article 3. *Filles isolées* – that is to say, those who do not reside in licensed brothels – may not enter these houses until after the lighting of the street lamps; they must proceed directly there and be dressed simply and decently” (Béraud 1839, 133-135; in Benjamin 2003, 499). However, Kirchner’s *Kokotten* are not exclusively designated by these red lights, but by the vibrant green, pink, and yellow streetlights of Weimar Berlin, much like the “hellish light, or [...] aurora borealis” Baudelaire describes as the alluring backdrop of the prostitute, an “object of public pleasure” in nineteenth century Paris (1995, 36-37). The natural darkness of night is displaced by intense coloured light, setting the tone for a decorative stage against which the displays and transactions of the night play out.

Kirchner’s replication of figures not as individuals but as *types* (specifically the new woman) seems to foreshadow Siegfried Kracauer’s essay “The Mass Ornament” (1927), in which the “sexless bodies” of dancing revue girls function as mass-produced ornaments for an increasingly consumerist society (1995, 76). The ostensible eroticism and militaristic star formations of their manoeuvres

are denuded of meaning, with Kracauer describing the lines of girls as “products of American distraction factories [who] are no longer individual girls, but indissoluble girl clusters whose movements are demonstrations of mathematics” (1995, 75-76). Kirchner foregrounds the women in his street scenes, but unlike

the revue girls, they are typically differentiated by costume, appearance, or height. However, it is the omnipresent male figure, replete with bowler hat and dark suit, who is replicated not as “mass ornament” but “mass consumer”. Devoid of identity, their line formation in Kirchner’s *Friedrichstraße Berlin* [3] is simultaneously militaristic and consumerist, queuing to purchase the *Kokotten* as merchandise. Their expressionless faces too are bathed in the toxic green light, a tuning of self and environment in which the body, lights, and the street become indivisible parts of the atmospheric whole.

### The Atmospheric Metropolis: Potsdamer Platz

Light carves space in shadow, and space can be entered, circulated, and embodied. The architect August Endell expounds a new breed of beauty in his paean to Berlin’s urban landscape, *The Beauty of the Metropolis* (1908). Endell appears alienated from his environment as the sole admirer of the Berlin streets, and consciously distances himself from the perceived “ugliness” of

urban architecture – in many ways a precursor to Simmel’s detached, blasé individual. Throughout the text he enthralls the reader with a never-ending stream of glitter, describing lantern light reflecting on wet asphalt as “glittering waves”, tram tracks glitter in the darkness, while rain is a “glittering net” cast over the street (2018, 64; 65; 55). Most significant is the architect’s understanding of atmosphere and its potential to evoke the metropolis through the delicately changing “veils of night”, observing not only the shifting lights at the transition



[3] Ernst Ludwig Kirchner:  
*Friedrichstraße Berlin*, 1914.  
Oil on canvas, 125 x 91cm.  
Staatsgalerie Stuttgart © bpk /  
Staatsgalerie Stuttgart.

of day to dusk, but the colourful palette of lamplight illuminating city streets (Endell 2018, 63-64). Once more, artificial light becomes integral to the generation and perception of nocturnal atmospheres. In 1905, Endell published a separate article titled “Der Potsdamer Platz in Berlin” in *Die Neue Gesellschaft*, extolling the delicate haze and shimmering lights of the square, where “two large lighting towers with their glittering red arc lamps hollow out enormous peaked domes in the thick, heavy air” (2018, 79). His essentially Impressionist, almost utopian interest in “veils” of light is somewhat at odds with the more aggressive visuality of Expressionism (Frisby 2007, 245); nevertheless, August Endell’s reflections on glittering lights resonate profoundly with the depictions of Potsdamer Platz by Kirchner and Lesser Ury as a site of illumination and leisure.

A node of traffic and metropolitan activity, Potsdamer Platz was one of the busiest intersections of modern Europe (Weitz, 2018, 43). The outbreak of war in 1914 saw the commodification of grief through the mourning veil; glamorised via advertising and window displays, widow’s weeds had become inappropriately popular among prostitutes (Simmons 2000, 130). Donning the mourning veil is a physical transformation of the individual from diurnal to nocturnal persona but also a camouflage, signalling the beginning of the working night under the auspices of propriety, as prostitutes were discouraged from certain areas including Potsdamer Platz (Simmons 2000, 132). However, it is Kirchner’s saturation of colour amidst darkness in *Potsdamer Platz* [4] that creates the greatest visual impact in terms of nocturnal atmospheres. Böhme considers the role of colour in the “ecstasies of things”, a type of visible presence in which the thing extends beyond itself – we see this manifested in the Expressionist deployment of colour as emotional marker. Both



[4] Ernst Ludwig Kirchner:  
*Potsdamer Platz*, 1914.  
Oil on canvas, 200 x 150 cm.  
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,  
Nationalgalerie / Jörg P. Anders  
CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

visceral and sickly, the green light tints the street as object, it extends from an unseen source and “asserts its presence in space and radiates into it”, reflecting as a yellow-green pallor on the figures (Böhme 2020, 51). Colour shapes the space, and makes visible the presence of light. A similar vortex of green and red



[5] Lesser Ury: *Potsdam Square by Night*, c. 1925. Oil on canvas, 79.6 x 100 cm. The Israel Museum Jerusalem © The Israel Museum Jerusalem by Avshalom Avital.

is found in Endell’s evocative sketch of the square by night, during which “the illuminated advertising with its harsh, squalid light, normally so abominable, now shimmers softly in the luminous green [of the sky]”, while the station glitters in a “sombre red” (2018, 114). Rather than glitter, Kirchner’s light glares, prolonged and insistent; as a bearer of atmospheric significance it “tinges” space, echoing in the felt body (Griffero 2018, 77). Where glittering catches light among its facets, attracting the eye in

the shadows, a glare repels the gaze with its intensity, just as the blank stare of the *Kokotten* is disengaged from their suitors.

While Kirchner’s use of the glare symbolises nightlife and prostitution in *Potsdamer Platz* [4], Lesser Ury employs the core motifs of atmospheric evocation – the haze, the reflection, and the incomplete – to describe the metropolis of *Potsdam Square by Night* [5] in Impressionist terms. The term “atmospheric perspective” gains phenomenological weighting in this context, in which the conventional perspectival technique of distant blue mountains here becomes shadowy clouds shrouding the Vaterland Café in a delicate haze, receding from foreground reflections. The blue hour of twilight becomes a liminal space at the juncture of day and night, just as the city undergoes its transformation from the working day to nightlife. With the sun below the horizon, light is diffused and details obscured by shadow. The painting bears visual witness to Endell’s descriptions of Potsdamer Platz over a decade earlier, in which the station façade is “almost devoured by a smoky mist that seems to envelop everything. The

whole thing gently coalesces, rendering depth almost imperceptible. [...] Black-clad figures form wondrous dark spots on the light grey asphalt” (2018, 114). A state of incompleteness invites the participation of imagination. The lights of the café are both light qua presence and indexical of social presences, amplified in the reflection on the flooding street, which accrue significance as objects in the pictorial space.

## **Conclusion**

To glitter is to shine. Bright lights glitter, as do their reflections and refractions, but glitter is never constant or fixed; instead, its sparkle shifts with varying intensity as it passes through the atmosphere. Glitter is also elusive: shimmering evokes an optical illusion, such as a mirage on the horizon. In the urban environment this effect is heightened by seasonality, climatic conditions such as mist or fog, or smoke as the index of industry, shrouding the light source in a haze. But with the crepuscular ebb of light, the effects of glitter are sharpened, and so too is our relationship with fluctuations of light. Where twilight heralds a sense of its own melancholic belatedness (Davidson 2017, 23), the illuminated night shimmers with the vitality of an artificial dawn. Shadows settle around streetlights and neon signs, emphasising their brightness or diffusing their gleam in the surrounding darkness. The allure is testament to the function of light as a marker of mood, which has the potential to “blur separations between object and subject, matter and feelings” (Bille 2015, 60).

The mesmerism of glittering lights is only appreciated when envisioning its absence in the metropolis: a void of darkness, the street becomes oppressive and unknowable, illuminated signage unreadable, people invisible. Lights are emblematic of the self and sociality, from Kirchner’s frenetic nightlife to Ury’s detached observations – even in Spilliaert or Jansson’s abandoned street, light is a presence of the self. Cast light creates cleared space, but it also reveals presence in and of the darkness. Light is inextricably linked to the production of atmospheres, and the effects of its emergence from concealment to revelation felt more keenly in the visual spectacle of the nocturnal city. As verbs, “glitter”, “shimmer”, “sparkle” imply movement as flashes of light appear and disappear, like the incendiary potential of a gaslight spark. Such movement underscores the shifting associations of glittering lights with introspection and isolation, leisure and transaction, each of which is intrinsic to the otherness of urban nightlife.

---

## ABSTRACT

This article examines the evocation of nocturnal atmospheres as embodied by the glittering urban streetlight in the work of Eugène Jansson (1862-1915), Léon Spilliaert (1881-1946), Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938), and Lesser Ury (1861-1931). Underpinned by contemporary aesthetic theories of atmosphere (Böhme, Ingold, Pallasmaa), I discuss the illuminated city as the ultimate motif of modernity, regarded through the prisms of Symbolism, Impressionism, and Expressionism. With lights mediating between the self and the metropolis, the nocturnal city unfolds as a series of dichotomies, oscillating from light to shadow, private to public, work to leisure. Two seminal texts, Georg Simmel's *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903) and August Endell's *The Beauty of the Metropolis* (1908) provide contextual grounding to this exploration of atmosphere and the modern metropolis.

---

## LITERATURE

- Baudelaire, Charles. 1995. *The Painter of Modern Life and other essays*. Translated and edited by Jonathan Mayne. London: Phaidon Press. First published 1863 as *Le peintre de la vie moderne* by *Le Figaro*.
- Benjamin, Walter. 2003. *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. First published 1982 as *Das Passagen-Werk* by Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Béraud, F. F. A. 1839. *Les Filles publiques de Paris et la police qui les régit*, vol. 2. Paris and Leipzig: Desforges et Cie.
- Bille, Mikkel. 2015. "Lighting up cosy atmospheres in Denmark." *Emotion, Space and Society* 15: 56-63.
- Böhme, Gernot. 2020. *Atmospheric Architectures: The Aesthetics of Felt Spaces*. Translated and edited by Anna Christina Engels-Schwarzpaul. London: Bloomsbury.
- Davidson, Peter. 2017. *The Last of the Light. About Twilight*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Endell, August. 2018. *The Beauty of the Metropolis*. Translated by James J. Conway. Berlin: Rixdorf Editions. First published 1908 as *Die Schönheit der großen Stadt* by Verlag von Strecker & Schröder, Stuttgart.
- Freud, Sigmund. 2003. *The Uncanny*. Translated by David McLintock. London: Penguin Books. First published 1919 as "Das Unheimliche" in *Imago* 5 (5-6).
- Frisby, David. 2007. *Cityscapes of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Griffero, Tonino. 2018. "Something More. Atmospheres and Pathic Aesthetics." In *Atmosphere/ Atmospheres: Testing a New Paradigm*, edited by Griffero and Giampiero Moretti, 75-89. Milan: Mimesis International.
- Haxthausen, Charles W. 1987. "'A New Beauty': Kirchner's Images of Berlin." In *Berlin: Culture and Metropolis*, edited by Haxthausen and Heidrun Suhr, 58-94. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Horn, Eva. 2018. "Air as Medium." *Grey Room*, 73 (Fall): 6-25.
- Ingold, Tim. 2012. "The Atmosphere." *Chiasmi International*, 14: 75-87.
- Kracauer, Siegfried. 1995. *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*. Edited by Thomas Y. Levin. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. First published 1963 as *Das Ornament der Masse: Essays*, Suhrkamp Verlag.

- Lefebvre, Henri. 1991. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Malden: Blackwell. First published 1974 as *La production de l'espace* by Anthropos, Paris.
- Meidner, Ludwig. 1970. "An Introduction to Painting Big Cities." In *Voices of German Expressionism*, edited by Victor H. Miesel, 110-113. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, 1993. "Eye and Mind." In *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader, Philosophy and Painting*, edited by Galen A. Johnson, translated by James M. Edie, 121-49. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. First published January 1961 as "L'oeil et l'esprit" in *Art de France* 1, no. 1.
- Pallasmaa, Juhani 2014. "Space, Place, and Atmosphere: Peripheral Perception in Existential Experience." In *Architectural Atmospheres: On the Experience and Politics of Architecture*, edited by Christian Borch, 18-41. Basel: Birkhäuser.
- Pallasmaa, Juhani 2007. *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture of the Senses*. Chichester: Wiley-Academy.
- Rank, Otto. 1979. *The Double*. Translated by Harry Tucker Jr. New York: Meridian Books. First published 1925 as *Der Doppelgänger: Eine Psychoanalytische Studie* by Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, Leipzig, Vienna, and Zürich.
- Simmel, Georg. 1971. "The Metropolis and Mental Life." Translated by Edward A. Shils. In *Georg Simmel On Individuality and Social Forms*, edited by Donald N. Levine, 324-339. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. First published 1903 as "Die Grosstadt und das Geistesleben" in *Die Grosstadt: Jahrbuch der Gehe-Stiftung* 9.
- Simmons, Sherwin. 2000. "Ernst Kirchner's Streetwalkers: Art, Luxury, and Immorality in Berlin, 1913-16." *Art Bulletin*, 82, no. 1 (March): 117-148.
- Sternberger, Dolf. 1977. *Panorama of the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Urizen Books.
- Weitz, Eric D. 2018. *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.