

# Urban Katabasis : Spectral Perambulations at Nighttime.

*Nikos Doulos is an Artist based in Amsterdam whose practice explores collective modes of knowledge production through modular participatory structures. He is particularly interested in ambulatory practices – where walking is utilized both as a research and as a performative device – and night as a prolific time to engage with the city. In the following text, Doulos introduces the modus operandi of night walking, a pathway to connect with past and present and with others (human and non-human). This leads to a reflection on the spectral presences and the fragmentary landscapes found in the underbelly of our societies, in which polyphonic voices emerge from the ruins of bygone certainties.*

This text is devised as an intuitive walkthrough of previously composed mumblings and freshly generated murmurs of thought that serves simultaneously as preparation to reading urban nocturnal perambulations as cognitive acts of metaphorical katabasis. The word derives from the Greek words κατά = down and βαίνω = go and is deployed to describe a descent of some sort (in Greek mythology, katabasis is most famously linked to Odysseus' and Orpheus' visit to the underworld). Much like an intuitive city stroll, this piece of writing encompasses bumps and hiccups, wrong turns, backward moves and detours and an overall indecisiveness in choosing a direction. Consequently, I encourage you to keep that in mind while reading it, hoping that you can yourself discover some cohesion to where I might have failed to provide it.

## POINT ZERO : WALKING HOME – A DEPARTURE

*“What if my body maps as it remembers to stand on its feet ?  
What if the city is entrapped within my body  
as I am entrapped in hers ?*

*Every human is a tour, and everybody is a map.  
My spine breaks its linearity and expands as a rhizome  
in all the edges of the metropolis. Every bone, a dot on*



Fig XX:

*a map, every dot, effectively attached with another causing a constant vibration to the city's topology —every piece, an epicentre, and altogether a seismic cacophony of narratives. My feet sense the vibrations of others before me and others beside me, the echoes of their histories reverberating in the ground beneath, walking the connected lines. I claim my spine back, but every encounter during this hunt expels its bones to all sides, for they are only parts of an ever-shifting collective endoskeleton. I can't seem to trace a core. I can't find my belly button. Where is my belly button? Where is yours?"*<sup>1</sup>

In December 2017, I led a performative walk in the centre of Athens by the title *Walking Home – Nightwalkers Session*. Founded on the idea of metaphorically tracing my scattered body parts in the city, *Walking Home* was a collective nocturnal stroll testing alternative modes of implicitly addressing histories (through mine), the transformative nature of Athenian cityscape, and my sense of displacement within. Following the steps of others before me became my main mode of operation, calling for a rather animated encounter with geographies, stories and histories of a recent ancestry while reworking relations with echoes of my past. 'Home' as a multilayered construct became the main field of my research and night walking my predominant (symbolic and literal) means of embedding myself into, and embodying, the Athenian topology—a reconciliation of some sort with ghosts and echoes of my formative years in the city.

*Walking Home* falls under the umbrella of an ongoing research trajectory titled *Nightwalkers* – a series of urban strolls examining all prospects of nocturnal perambulations (sensorial, narratological, pedagogical, social). *Nightwalkers* exists predominantly as an extension of Expodium's practice – an urban do-tank that utilizes artistic means to talk about the city. Expodium is loosely based in Utrecht (The Netherlands) and is co-directed by me, historian and cultural activist Friso Wiersum and cultural producer Bart Witte.

## ROUTE I: WALKING WITH OTHERS

Within the extensive tradition of urban wandering, walking is considered first and foremost a relational enterprise that implies a constant dialogue between what constitutes the self and all visible and invisible entities, human and non-human alike. That is to say, an emergence into, and a traversing through, an intertwined web of past and present occurrences, and of projections and speculations of what is yet to come; of an amalgamation of incidental encounters, of recollections of memories and their internal reverberations, and summons instigated not only by the enchanting qualities of a given topology but also by the realization that we are destined to walk where others have walked before us.

In *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London*, Lauren Elkin describes her own experiences of flânerie on the streets of Paris looking for ghosts, "glimpsing its unofficial history here and there" always "on the lookout for residue, for texture, for accidents and encounters and unexpected openings".<sup>2</sup> Particularly on one occasion, she randomly witnesses the resurfacing of mid-20th-century Parisian cobblestones, previously covered by layers of asphalt, following the 1968 revolt. She wonders who could have walked those streets planning the revolt and "what drives a person to dig their fingers into the crust of Paris as if it were nothing but sand" and pluck a stone from its setting.<sup>3</sup> She finally draws a loose parallel to the 1968 street graffiti *Sous les pavés, la plage* (*Under the paving stones, the beach*), leaving it up to the reader to form their associations.

Suppose the beach stands as a symbolic representation of a destination after a revolt. Could the act of mentally excavating the streets in order to find it be considered revelatory if not revolutionary?

There is something in Elkin's narration that speaks to those modes of attending to the streets that encompass a rhizomatic relation to thought evoked by simply recognizing that we are, literally and metaphorically, to walk in the footsteps of others. It also reinforces my belief that we never walk alone, in the sense that we are carriers of gifts and burdens, privileges and restrictions, entitlements and misfortunes passed on by others who have shaped the world before us and continue to do so for us. And much like in

<sup>2</sup> Lauren Elkin, *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London* (Vintage, Penguin Random House UK, 2016), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Lauren Elkin, *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London*, 96.

<sup>1</sup> *Walking Home* – Nikos Doulos & Christos Chrissopoulos. Script expert from a narratological performance, Circuits & Currents, November 2107, Athens.

Elkin's encounter, I wish to acknowledge urban walking as a vocation, and an evocative act of rendering oneself (and of things) lost and found in a world transcribed through an infinite reconciliation with what is registered seen and unseen, familiar and unfamiliar. A dual act of haunting, if I may say.

## ROUTE II: HAUNTING AND THE NOCTURNAL

Matthew Beaumont in *The Walker: On Finding and Losing Yourself in the Modern City* makes a call to haunt and render the streets unhomey (haunt', incidentally, is related to the Old English hām meaning 'home) as an act of making places accountable to those who inhabit them rather than the ones who seek to monetize them, and argues that "we need both to frequent them as familiar places and, like spectres, to disturb them and make them seem unfamiliar".<sup>4</sup> In my experience, nighttime has been profoundly accommodating to this enterprise.

Author of *Dark Matters – A Manifesto For the Nocturnal City*, Nick Dunn points that "...the vectors of nighttime walking enable us to reconnect with the city...which affords the 'divining' of a different experience of place, providing a welcome respite from the ongoing erosion and subdivision of our time and sense of belonging in the world."<sup>5</sup> Dunn defines nocturnal wandering as an act that encompasses a blurring of boundaries. He supports his claim by attending to Tim Ingold's observation that "the more one reads into the land, the more difficult it becomes to ascertain with any certainty where substances end and the medium begins".<sup>6</sup> In his renowned book *24/7 – Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, Jonathan Crary speaks of a world of a 24/7 permanent illumination as "a disenchanted one in its eradication of shadows and obscurity and of alternative temporalities; a world with the shallowest of pasts...without spectres" as an effect of the "fraudulent brightness that presumes to extend everywhere and to pre-empt every mystery or unknowability".<sup>7</sup>

Drawing from Crary's line of thought, André Lepecki, writer and curator on performance studies, calls for a 'dark promise'

whereby we enter a space of speculation through dark mirroring when we are in the dark – through dark illumination; a process of active and necessary depersonalization where the corner, the obscure, the occult reveal to us another possibility of socialization.<sup>8</sup> Along with their arguments, I wish to make a case for nocturnal ramblings as an enchanting mode of plunging into the night and an exercise of temporal depersonalization in an attempt to re-assemble the self through a patchwork of unexpected occurrences forged on and traversed in each given geography. Thus, night walking constitutes a task of metaphorically descending to a nocturnal cosmos by confronting and relating to the leftovers of every day, with the seemingly (un)dead and the potentially unearthed. Accomplishing this calls for a sensorial, imaginative – almost surgical – descent. Fragments of a new form of socialization and self-awareness might then effectively arise.

## DETOUR I: ODYSSEUS' KATABASIS – BEING WITH GHOSTS

In the 11th book of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus follows the advice of Circe and visits the underworld to acquire information regarding his nostos (his homecoming) and his life thereafter. During his visit, the souls of many appear to him. Fortune teller Tiresias instructs Odysseus to allow the spirits he wishes to encounter to drink from the *sacrificial* blood he used to find him. If Beaumont calls for a haunting of the streets in terms of us operating as ghosts, then Homer's depiction of Odysseus' descent to the underworld speaks of us being with ghosts. In that respect, I wonder what sacrificial act one needs to perform to grant oneself access to the city's nocturnal undercurrents (taking that literally as well as metaphorically)? To summon? Aware of my privileges as a white, cis, able-bodied male wanderer, I find it difficult to offer responses that speak to many. Perhaps plunging into uncertain paths in assertive uncertainty might be just the way to go about it. One thing that could be inscribed as a common attribute to these forms of venturing – much like Odysseus – some coming to terms with loss and longing – or at least an attempt to. There is something etched in the spirit of the nocturnal wanderer that speaks to the incomplete, the unfinished and the debris of a yearning through a condition

4 Matthew Beaumont, *The Walker: On Finding and Losing Yourself in the Modern City* (Verso, 2020), 45 (e-pub edition)

5 Nick Dunn, *Dark Matters – A Manifesto For the Nocturnal City* (Zero Books, 2016)

6 Nick Dunn, *Dark Matters – A Manifesto For the Nocturnal City*

7 Jonathan Crary, *24/7 – Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (Verso, 2013), 19.

8 André Lepecki, *In the Dark* – lecture at Studium Generale Rietveld Academie Conference/Festival: *ARE YOU ALIVE OR NOT? Looking at ART through the lens of THEATRE* (source: [https://youtu.be/e\\_FeFhYDvUs](https://youtu.be/e_FeFhYDvUs))



of subtraction (a reconciliation with the minus). Being with ghosts thus entails a process of being with the unfinished, with ruins and in ruins. And in contrast to ruling regimes of growth and accumulation, this sense of embracing the minus as an act of reconciling with the unfinished poses to me a far more meaningful negotiation with the everyday. If growth implies a move upwards, then my proposition definitely resonates with moves inward, downward and underneath.

#### DETOUR II: ON THE RUINIFICATION OF THE SELF

In his book *Φακός Στο Στόμα* (*Torch in the mouth*), Christos Christopoulos describes the Athenian every day as one accustomed to the sight of the unfinished, the unrepaired or the truly destroyed. He references human ruins as spectral shadowy creatures and our encounters with them as an aversion mirroring our relation to the 'other' that shakes our ontological foundations. He later comes to speak of an 'emotional purging' in the urban fabric and calls for our confrontation with the Athenian passers-by for "they always move in contact with the ground – low at the root of the city", writing "the urban text unconsciously because they write a collective text. Something like an exquisite corpse".<sup>9</sup> It is in the fugitive nature of this polyphony of ruins into which the nocturnal wanderer is to descend, functioning both as a co-author and a decipherer of this exquisite corpse. Perhaps, pondering over one's own *ruini ica-tion* properties – as a ruin among ruins – while roaming the urban landscape grants open access to that script at night.

#### ROUTE III: THE ZONE

In *Orphée* (1950), Jean Cocteau depicts Orpheus equipped with a pair of enchanted surgical gloves gifted by Heurtibise (a young servant of Death) sliding through his room mirror to find himself in the Zone – a non-place where souls wander around unaware of their passing. Throughout the film, mirrors become confrontation-al vehicles to the protagonists' mortality and prospective gateways to the underworld. Similar to the dark mirroring that Lepecki pro-poses, mirrors take the role of props that initially confront the self through an obvious reflection, only to erase it through an almost sacrificial exit of the self towards the 'other' side.

I like to believe it is that instance of transition which gives flesh to Lepecki's thought for temporal depersonalization and precisely this submerging into the underworld that calls for the reassembling of the self, opting for new forms of dark sociality. With regards to the latter, Orpheus' dialogue with Heurtibise while crossing the Zone is most telling:

*“Orpheus: Where are we ?*

*Heurtibise: Life is a long death...*

*This is the Zone. It is made out of  
men's memories and ruins of their habits.*

*Orpheus: Does every mirror in the world lead here ?*

*Heurtibise: I suppose so. But do not  
give me too much credit.”*

It is this place – “made of men's memories and the ruins of their habits” – that stands as a metaphorical topos where night walking finds itself as a condition suspended in darkness. The nocturnal wanderer is then to seek illumination through an education on palindromic gestures of departing and arriving at where 'all that is lost and all that remains' resides; an education on the mutations of the urban landscape, of peoples, of ruins, of recollections and on unexpected openings beneath the surface of things (earth included).

The Zone is not a mere trope for the underworld. It is an elusive analogy to the world(s) we currently occupy. Let us be reminded of that while performing our own katabasis to the nocturnal city. ☉

<sup>46</sup> Christos Christopoulos, *Φακός Στο Στόμα* (Polis, 2012), 117 (translation from original Greek expert).