

Physical and digital spaces of expanding darkness

Sociospatial (counter)practices

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Darkness is often associated with criminal or shady activities, and with the need to hide something that is prohibited by laws or social norms.¹ Yet, darkness may also be metaphor for sought spaces of intimacy, recovery, refuge, protection, resistance to sociospatial (hyper)visibility as well as to pervasive surveillance and dataveillance. Below we will navigate four overlapping movements towards and away from darkness, looking at how they intersect and negotiate their presence with sociospatial practices of visibility and light: darkness and gendered fear of crime; darkness and the need for physical / digital sociospatial (in)visibility; dark sousveillance vs datafied norm; expanding analogue spaces of darkness.

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I. Darkness and gendered fear of crime

I am walking on a street. It's dark, and the street is poorly lit. The street appears to be empty, even though I can see shadows in a distance; someone is also walking somewhere, slowly, being careful not to slip on ice. This is a very common scenario in middle-size urban areas from where I live, in the southern part of Finland, in the dark winter times, where the sun would show itself only for few hours during the day. Even though Finland is considered a safe country, especially when it comes to street crime, the feeling of uneasiness that I get when walking on a dark, poorly lit street, does not really fade away, as a foreign woman used to live in reportedly not-so-safe big cities in the southern part of Europe. My own imaginaries, intersecting with collective ones on poorly lit streets in urban areas at night, tend to be ones of higher risk of crime: they thus translate into fear of assaults, anti-social behaviour, drug dealing, theft, happening in those spaces. In short, into fear of crime.

When investigating fear of crime in dark or poorly lit public spaces, critical and feminist geographical scholarships emphasise its being highly gendered, relational, spatiotemporal, and frequently connected with territorial stigma (Roy, 2026). These nuances identify the processual making of the fear of crime itself as intertwined with multiple factors. In this view, my example, of me carrying the inherent 'sociospatial condition' of being a foreign woman in Finland, may have subtly modulated and gendered my own fear of the dark, and thus, my fear of crime, resulting in higher imagined and perceived sense of risk and vulnerability. My fear of crime may thus result from a complex intersection of the actual space I am walking in, with its own unique affordances, its known 'reputation' (does this space carry a territorial stigma?), my personal recollection of previous experiences and memories of dark urban spaces, as well as personal and collective imaginaries related to what may have happened to other women walking across such spaces. Such nuanced understanding of the fear of crime may

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for example call for a right to more gendered spaces, or gendered-sensitive urban design, where spaces may be co-designed with women so that, for example, the latter could comfortably 'sit, lay down, alone or in a group, see, be seen and be near an exit point' (De Muret, 2019). Being away from darkness thus seems to be a characteristic of gendered-sensitive design — but is this desire to escape dark spaces always shared, and is darkness always associated with perceived unsafety?

II. Darkness and the need for physical / digital sociospatial (in) visibility

The apparently dichotomous and clear-cut distinction between light/safe and dark/unsafe has however many shades in between. Relationally, darkness may also be positively connected with the need to be less sociospatially visible. Here, darkness and the invisibility that it carries increases, rather than diminishing, the sense of safety. This may be valid for certain groups of people, such as undocumented migrants or other vulnerable groups, who do not wish to attract unwanted attention, especially in public spaces (Tedeschi, 2022). In this other interpretation, claiming a right to be sociospatially invisible, or less visible, dissociates darkness from unsafety and fear of crime, and instead shifts its meaning towards a right to spaces where one can hide and feel protected, without being constantly subjected to the scrutinizing glance of others.

Similarly to physical spaces, digital dark spaces also tend to be associated with unsafety and criminal activities: in the dark web, illicit material may be shared, fake IDs sold, humans trafficked. Yet again similarly to physical spaces, 'going digitally dark' may indicate the need to remain sociospatially hidden and protected from constant surveillance (e.g. CCTV cameras on the streets) and dataveillance (e.g. seamless and unwanted data extraction from own digital tech devices). It may be thus associated with sociospatial practices such as disabling geolocation on the smartphone when not needed, or using the dark web Tor browser to avoid being tracked online. These everyday actions are not necessarily signs of moral or legal transgression, but they may rather be attempts to resist datafication, where dark web is sought to gain digital invisibility, and, thus, in this context, sense of increased safety and protection of privacy. A right to opacity (Birchall, 2016) can be thus pursued through such data obfuscation.

Talvitie-Lamberg, Lehtinen and Valtonen (2024) have scrutinised such tactics of digital invisibility: for example, what strategies vulnerable individuals use to 'go dark' and escape digital spaces', and especially social media's, unwanted hypervisibilisation. They include for example: avoiding sharing content (or anyway anything too personal) online; or routinely changing apps/SIM/names/profiles; or using browsers' incognito windows. Other strategies are e.g. trying to trick the algorithms so as to mislead them and/or resist data collection and profiling (Sander, 2024), or, as one of Ruckenstein's (2023) research participants shared, writing on paper instead of online their own intimate thoughts, without the worry of them being (mis)used online.

III. Dark sousveillance vs datafied norm

Arnett (2020) defines dark sousveillance these resistance practices of remaining out of sight, and, thus, becoming, data-wise, as invisible as possible. Yet, just as the fear of dark physical spaces exists on a spectrum intersectionally shaped by e.g. gender and personal history and characteristics, so too does digital sociospatial (in)visibility engage with multiple shades of light and darkness. Some people choose digital half-light or semi-darkness, for example trying to negotiate their everyday life with the algorithms, by giving up some data, when they feel it is not too compromising, or it is anyway useful in terms of being able to access and use key services in return. However, others pursue full darkness and use radical forms of data resistance, such as deleting all their social media profiles, or exclusively using Private Virtual Networks (VPN) for online navigation. Yet, it may still be hard to live an entirely non-datafied, digitally dark life, when for instance walking in public spaces, where

surveillance cameras record movements, or one may be caught in a picture taken by others, and then published in social media.

This move towards radical data resistance sits at one end of a spectrum. At the other end lies its mirror image: not the refusal of datafication, but its wholehearted embrace. Here, someone may choose to 'become-data': to follow the datafied norms and give full light and visibility to their digital self, or double, while the physical self is the mirror, the copy of the double. The latter is thus fully nurtured and visibilised, but not without constraint: aesthetic standards must be followed to increase chances of being included and accepted online. For example, some social media promote 'filters, which can allow users to alter their appearances in either subtle or substantial ways . . . can provide smooth and even skin tones, larger eyes, fuller lips, more angled jawlines, whiter teeth, and thinner faces' (Wang et al., 2020: 1129). People would thus adjust their own physical bodies to better match these online filters. As a consequence, medical interventions are sought to become more similar to the online filtered image (Wang et al. 2020). Here, interestingly, the body pushed towards darkness or half-light is at times the original, unfiltered, 'physical' one: the one that deviates from the datafied norm (Tedeschi & Verdu Sanmartin, 2026).

IV. Expanding analogue spaces of darkness

While datafied, digital life remains largely prevalent, to the extent that in some cases it may even become a key way in which specific aspects of selfhood and persona are visibilised, a desire to move from such sociospatial hypervisibility to reduced visibility or increased 'analogue darkness' is emerging. There are aspects of the self that, some critical data studies reveal, people wish to protect and keep in such 'analogue darkness': 'Emotions, mood and feelings, thoughts, secrets, bodily sensations and sensory responses, spirituality, moral beliefs, personality, irrationalities, hopes, dreams and aspirations' (Lupton, 2021: 12). Simultaneously, non-datafied or less datafied spaces are sought. Places such as urban parks or forests — or libraries even. Places where surveillance and dataveillance are perceived as being less pervasive and invasive, especially if one remembers to deactivate the GPS function, or switches the phone off entirely (Tedeschi, Hautala, & Resmini, 2025). Just as one may seek physical spaces of increased darkness for protection, so too does the digitally fatigued person seek spaces where datafication's reach is weakened.

Here, a movement can be felt, of withdrawing. It is a movement towards darkness: towards a sense of self that remains intimate and is not shared online, with the risk of being misused. The darkness is never complete, though. There are various degrees of half-lights and semi-darkness that people encounter and negotiate their everyday life with, in the same way that the spectrum of fear of crime and the spectrum of data resistance admit no simple binary. So, every daily sociospatial micro-decision, micro-action, and micro-practice are a negotiation, of how dark one decides to go. There are things that one wants to keep completely dark. Others may come to light, as long as harm is not generated from them, or can be as much as possible prevented. In navigating these degrees of darkness (choosing what to keep hidden, what to allow into the light, and on whose terms) people may enact a quiet but persistent claim to a sense of selves and spaces that exceeds what being sociospatially visible can capture.

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