

The Aesthetics and Imaginaries of the Night in Cuba Bridging Audiovisual Ethnography and Film Studies

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AFTERWORD

*The Aesthetics and Imaginaries of the Night:
Bridging Audiovisual Ethnography and Film Studies*

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Night between aesthetics and politics: The affaire P.M.

1961 was a year of turmoil in Cuba, with the attempted military invasion of the Bay of Pigs. It was also the first case of censorship of a Cuban film by the local authorities that caused one of the first schisms among artists and intellectuals of the time, after the 1959 Revolution. Rather than engaging with political content, the film that caused big tensions within the circle of intellectuals and the government was a short experimental film about the night. Titled *P.M.*, the film directed by Alberto Cabrera Infante and Orlando Jiménez Leal portrayed nightlife in Havana and was released on the Canal 2 TV show: *Lunes en TV*.

The directors of the film were commissioned by the TV channel with the goal to record the heroic, nationalist and revolutionary efforts put in place by Cubans to push back the invaders of the Bay of Pigs (Vincenot 2009). Rather than focusing on the fervent political context, the filmmakers were struck by the effervescent and hedonistic atmosphere of Havana's nightlife, and created a poetic ode to the night instead. The film was praised by yet-to-be acclaimed director of photography Nestor Almendros on the well-known magazine *Bohemia* stating: "P.M. is extremely realist and at the same time deeply poetic [...] it is a little film [...] that finally captures the full atmosphere of nightlife" (in Vincenot 2009).¹ *P.M.* is an ode to

1. Translated by the authors. See Vincenot (2009) for a comprehensive reconstruction of the political context and the internal debates between the film-makers and film critics that brought the film censorship.

el cine espontaneo, the free cinema, characterized by a DIY ethos, portable cameras, no dialogue, a mix of music and on-site recordings, the film-maker as observer of everyday life and the camera as their means of expression (see also Masin 2013).

The Cuban revolutionary government and intellectuals of the time considered this impertinent and independent gaze into Havana's nightlife a threat to the revolutionary heroic principles, and in a matter of days after its release, earned its censorship. The decision was taken by ICAIC, the Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos, who released the official statement (AA.VV. 1961). Some of its members did not agree with the decision, such as renowned film director Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, co-founder of ICAIC, who resigned from the institute in opposition to the official censorship (2009). One of the reasons put forth by the committee for banning the film was that it provided "a partial depiction of nightlife in Havana, impoverished, disfigured and distorted, rather than giving the spectator a correct view of the Cuban people's existence at this revolutionary stage."² This imaginary portraying of a sensuous, spontaneous, untameable Havana nightlife was not to be screened, according to the authorities. Years later, *P.M.* remains a very well-known film among Cubans despite, and mostly because of its fate and public debate. The *affaire P.M.* has also given much life to academic writing about Cuban documentary, experimental cinema and politics, being the first Cuban film to be censored after the Revolution (Luis 1987; Masin 2013; Vincenot 2009).

Nightlife, nocturnal aesthetics and cinematic imaginaries

With an experimental real-time approach, the film accompanies the viewer through a sensorial voyage in the *noche cubana*. From extreme close-ups to medium shots, *P.M.* builds on the affective atmosphere of intimate sensuous encounters. The camera follows night owls while dancing, playing rumba music, consuming alcohol and comfort food. Only a few exterior scenes situate the viewer in front of some well-known bars, such as Rumba Chori, while the soundtrack brings the viewer back to the bar interior. There is no dialogue, no linear story to be followed, only camera movements capturing bodily encounters combined with a soundtrack mixing music with undistinguished night chats. Towards the end, the atmosphere changes to signal that the night is soon to be over. While sounds of live rumba music and people chatting fade away, replaced by a recorded nostalgic soundtrack, rhythmic moving bodies sit to rest, enjoy a last drink and eat some food.

2. Translated by the authors as quoted in Vincenot (2009).

Le voyage au bout de la nuit is over, but to be repeated. The journey concludes in a loop of repetition, with patrons leaving on the same boat that opened the film. The point of view of the opening sequence follows night owls on a boat venturing into Havana's nightlife in the harbour area, while the closing scene is captured in the bar area filming the boat leaving and disappearing in the dark. In so doing, the point of view acts as a witness of nightlife rhythms. The camera stays in the transitional and liminal space of the harbour as a reminder that another night has yet to come and another boat will arrive once the sun sets. Filmed over multiple nights, the film is edited into what Will Straw (2015) has named single-night narrative: a journey over an obscure and enchanted territory that lasts only one night, but that will be repeated. Night then appears as a site for the formation of imaginaries and aesthetic principles that silently inform and affect the day "through the hidden, forbidden, and forgotten [...] a journey into the night is a journey to the end of a night, from which we wake up in a day that has been changed because of this passage" (Bronfen 2013: 21–22). As we shall see, it is exactly because of these aesthetic principles that political decisions on the film are taken.

Audiovisual ethnography and the aesthetics of enchantment: *Guardians of the Night*

The affective dimension of *P.M.*, where the experimental nocturnal aesthetics intertwine with a-political intentions that are then received as political statements, resonates with our own ethnographic practice almost sixty years later. In December 2017, we conducted audiovisual ethnographic fieldwork recording over multiple nights the nighttime activities in Guantánamo, Cuba. Accompanied by local electronic musician and collaborator, Lázaro Antonio Sevilla Elías Calles, alias Zevil Strix, and choreographer, Yoel Gonzalez Rodríguez, who was our local producer, we explored the night with the intention of producing a sensory film portraying the people inhabiting darkness. The outcome of our nocturnal ethnography is a short atmospheric and experimental film titled *Guardians of the Night* (2018).³

The film is composed as a tryptic, narrating the different trajectories of six characters inhabiting the *noche guantanamera*. Each part of the tryptic is comprised of two stories that intersect without dialogue, while

3. The film *Guardians of the Night* is available at this address: <https://vimeo.com/275404965>. Information about the film can be found on the website: <https://guardiansnight.wordpress.com>.

sound and rhythms dictate a moody and nocturnal atmosphere. As such, the film engages multisensorially with the activities occurring at night in Guantánamo from an experimental and atmospheric perspective. The night allowed us to develop a sensuous and experimental approach to ethnography in which the process of filmmaking and sound recording became our fieldwork experience. *Guardians of the Night* intermingles experimental aesthetic codes, composed of close-up images following the encounters of bodies in the night with on-site sound recording and original electronic music composition. In order to engage with what we call a *participant-listening* approach, we argue that the night in Cuba enabled a shift from observational (as a traditional anthropological, western-centered way of knowing) to an immersive, embodied listening method (see Diamanti and Boudreault-Fournier 2021). Choosing Cuba as our fieldwork site meant working in a dense sonic environment where sound and hearing play an important role in the shared sensory experiences of everyday practices (Andrisani 2017; 2019). The film portrays every-night practices in Cuba. Its aesthetic form is experimental, sensorial and affective, as was *P.M.*

Guardians of the Night premiered in May 2018, in the main cinema in downtown Guantánamo after a performance by the dance company Medula led by choreographer Yoel Gonzalez Rodríguez, our film's local producer. After the screening, a local head representative of the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC, the sole legal political party on the island) politely congratulated us on our film but addressed the fact that she did not understand its message. We replied that our film was a poem to the night, our intention was neither to engage with politics nor to critique the system. But at the same time, "everything is political in Cuba," and this experience echoes the official reception that the film *P.M.* received many decades ago. Yet, the PCC representative's reaction is also indicative of how the night is often perceived as a mysterious territory in which sensuousness, free-spiritedness, rebelliousness and all that is swept under the carpet by our day-time societies runs rampant and needs to be controlled.

In fact, and to conclude, the affaire *P.M.* was in the end not a case of censorship of ideas and representation, rather a control over aesthetic forms. Specifically, at the time, the aesthetic of free cinema did not respond to the ideological artistic view of the institutions (ICAIC), and more largely the political party that favoured styles of realism closer to Soviet aesthetic. Scholar Marc Olivier Reid (2017) makes a comparison between the two prominent aesthetics of the time, comparing *P.M.* to the Soviet film *Soy Cuba* (Kalatoz 1964), released in the same period. He calls for an

aesthetic of disorder for the former and one of order for the latter, where nightlife becomes a problem to be controlled. In comparing the film to our own audiovisual practice, we argue that *P.M.*, inasmuch as *Guardians of the Night*, not only contributes to the strand of single-night narrative, but they are also related by a common aesthetic that we call the aesthetic of enchantment. In a way, the directors of *P.M.* ventured into the Cuban night like ethnographers conducting sensory ethnography, where sensorial approaches to anthropology propose that audiovisual recordings can become “routes to multisensorial knowing” (Pink 2009: 99). Those forms of knowing, which contrast with a more traditional descriptive understanding of knowledge production (for example, written text), stimulate what ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougall (1998: 81) called a form of *knowledge by acquaintance*, an affective approach to knowing. In embracing a filming aesthetic that aims to grasp the unspeakable and untameable nocturnal sensibilities and rhythms, we adopted a sensuous ethnographic approach to the night

Echoing *Disenchanted Night*, the historical inquiry into the industrialization of lighting in the 19th century Western world, by Wolfgang Schivelbush (1995), enchantment appears as affective fascination with darkness evoked by the nocturnal hours and threatened by electric illumination. But illumination can also be an insight lived and experienced through darkness that silently informs the day as Elisabeth Bronfen argues: “the night— with all the fears, promises, desires, and fantasies it evokes— always contains elements of the day that precedes and succeeds it, even while the day struggles to master the mysterious residue of night’s illuminations” (2013: 15). The aesthetic of enchantment is affective and sensory, tight to liberating desires, embodiment, recursive rhythms and time suspension belonging to the complex and sometimes contradictory nocturnal times that fade away but haunt the daily experience. The nocturnal aesthetic of enchantment preceded and informed the daily political tensions that would follow and that would bring the directors and commentators involved in the affaire *P.M.* to leave the country in exile (Vincenot 2009)

In an interview released to Michael Chanan, Alea states that “*P.M.* was like a little rumba, fresh air breaking with schemes,” an ode to the night portraying phantasms coming from a parallel underworld that builds on people’s sensibilities (1996). On the same note, director Jiménez Leal interviewed by the *Encuentro de la cultura cubana* journal noted that “the underworld of *P.M.* was curiously elegant. We’re talking about that other Havana, secret and lightly ribbed, parallel to the legendary bright Havana

that everyone knows” (Zayas 2008: 192).⁴ Building on this enchanted aesthetic of nocturnal underworlds that haunt the day, we played with the cinematic imaginary that our ethnographic fieldwork suggested while finding confirmation in more recent Cuban films.

Cinematic imaginaries of disenchantment in Alberto Pérez's *Suite Habana*

The title of our film is inspired by a specific figure that we encountered during our fieldwork and that we came to refer to as *guardians of the night*, a loose reference to the *guardias*: sessions of night-watching organized by the locally based association called Committees for the Defense of the Revolution. To respond to the lack of vision, we awakened our ears and listened carefully to the soundscapes of the night. Captured by our recording devices and later edited into an original soundtrack, the sounds of the night became our primary inspiration to explore the multiple encounters with *guardians*. These people inhabit the night performing the act of watching and guarding over objects or settings, such as a train or bus station (figures 1 and 2), a school (figure 3), a park, a theatre, or a statue. We also noticed how Cuban cinema at the turn of the century has made use of such figures to build an imaginary, that we came to call an imaginary of disenchantment.

Particularly, for the sake of this postface, we decided to focus on *Suite Habana* directed by Alberto Pérez (2003), a film that informed our own ethnographic research and audiovisual practice, both for its aesthetic and imaginary.⁵ Similarly to *Guardians of the Night* and *P.M.*, *Suite Habana* makes use of sound to build its visual aesthetic and filmic imaginary. Between fiction and documentary, the film follows the life of Habanero/ as through a day in the capital without dialogue. As Tania Gentic argues, Pérez used sound to achieve a mundane and emotional representation of life in the city “creating its reality effect by also producing an aural imaginary of Havana’s sonic space for the spectator” (2013: 201). While the use and manipulation of sound was influential for our own filmmaking and audiovisual sensory ethnographic practice, the film’s portrayals of *guardia* sessions strongly contributed to the creation of a common imaginary that deals with a state of disenchantment embodied by the people inhabiting the night while performing an unproductive and hopeless activity. Such portrayal of hopelessness for the future and suspension of present time

4. Translated by the authors.

5. Our research takes into consideration other films that make use of guardians, tracing a wider cinematic imaginary.



Guardians of the Night, train station (Figure 1), bus station (Figure 2), school (Figure 3), Guantánamo, Cuba. Boudreault-Fournier and Diamanti, 2018.

reflects the period when the film was set that still continues today. The turn of the century was characterized by economic harshness and material scarcity for Cubans, following the Special Period declared by Fidel Castro after the fall of the Soviet Bloc in 1991.

While the film engages with a 24-hour time span, the opening and closing sequences happen at nighttime, portraying El Morro's lighthouse glimmering in the dark and the guardians of the night. The film opens with an extreme close-up of John Lennon statue's eyes and glasses, at night, in a park situated in the Vedado neighborhood in Havana. The gaze and the glasses as looking apparatus stare into a poorly lit urban park and they are stared upon by a guardian sitting on a chair. The scene is static, and as Elliott Young (2007) notices, scarcity is materially inscribed into the decrepit chair on which the guardians perform their job as well as into the reason why they are guarding the statue: to prevent people from stealing the glasses (40). The statue of John Lennon was inaugurated by Fidel Castro in 2000 by pronouncing the famous lines from the song *Imagine*: "You may say that I'm a dreamer but I'm not the only one" (Young 2007: 40), after the Beatles' music was banned for decades in Cuba as a sign of resistance against capitalist popular music.

As Young recalls, the statue's guardians might be understood as taking care of the socialist dream (2007: 40), but we argue that Cuban films of the early 2000s have made use of such nocturnal figures to tap into an imaginary of suspension of the present time and hopelessness for the future, that we call the imaginary of disenchantment. At the beginning, the film shows the *guardia* shift at dawn while the sun slowly rises over the capital. The early morning guardian sits alone on a chair, and stares into John Lennon's glasses. The following scene moves into the hustle and bustle of daily routine, the camera follows different people through their everyday activities. An extreme close-up of Lennon's glasses, the guardian's eyes, and other people's gaze and glasses are interspersed in the film, as a reminder that it is showing Cuban everyday life through the perspective of the locals. While the daily cycle comes to an end and enters into the evening, the film shows common nightlife activities: a concert by Silvio Rodríguez, classic ballet at the theatre, social dancing, a drag queen show and finally people slowly going to bed. A long close-up span shows people gazing in the dark before entering sleep. When the last protagonist closes the door of her room, going to bed, the only one who is awake is the lonely guardian staring at the John Lennon statue. The final scene portrays the guardians' shift under a tearing rain at night, while they exchange some

hot drinks and keep watching upon the statue while everyone else's eyes are closed. John Lennon and the guardian give each other the eye, and finally El Morro's lighthouse enlightens darkness with glimpses of light.

All of the characters are introduced throughout the film by their name and their age. At the end, the credit lines note their job and their dreams in life. The last protagonist, Amanda Gautier, is introduced as a retired textile worker who sells peanuts to survive and has no dreams. The metaphor of the gaze and dreams is prominent in the film, from John Lennon statue, his glasses and his music lines as a dreamer, to the many other close-ups of people's eyes staring in the dark before sleeping. The guardians are the only ones not to be introduced, not to bear a name or a job, not to have the right to sleep nor have dreams in life. They inhabit the unspoken territory of night where dreams should happen, but they are prevented from experiencing them through sleep or expressing them in the film. Pérez plays with the act of gazing through the night, and more broadly into Cuban everyday life, building on an enchanted aesthetic that portrays sensorily and embodied atmospheres. The film also contributes to an imaginary of disenchantment, where the guardians of the night stare into past revolutionary ideals without the possibility of dreaming for the future. Likewise, our ethnographic sensory and experimental film shows a number of guardians of the night performing this hopeless act of looking into the night, in an enchanted atmosphere of suspension that speaks to the disenchantment of Cubans in a time of harsh economic transition.

Night provides a glimpse into the harshness of material scarcity and the lack of dreams for the future. While dreams are recounted by those that are allowed to rest from their daily routine, the guardians that inhabit the night can only keep staring into ideals in a suspended time without any possibility of dreaming for a better future. As Bronfen argues: "aesthetic rediscoveries of the night [...] self-consciously speak to the night we carry within, the psychic nocturnality we need to experience and explore" (2013: 21). Focusing on the night in film and audiovisual ethnography, from an aesthetic and imaginary point of view, allows one to grasp sensibilities that inform the day, and that would go unnoticed otherwise. In conclusion, we want to highlight the rich path that is offered by interdisciplinary methods, bridging ethnographic work rooted in social sciences, audiovisual in our case, with the humanities, and specifically film studies. We hope that this special issue will contribute to the discussion around interdisciplinarity that is central to Night Studies, as well as highlighting the necessity to develop a method and a focus on the night when engaging with ethnographic fieldwork.

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