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URBAN LABOR AND THE CINEMATIC NOCTURNE

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This chapter is concerned with recent cinematic representations of night-time work in cities.¹ It examines six feature films released in 2019 and 2020 which, even when they are telling fictional stories, serve at some level as documentations of night-time labor. We shall see that a focus on night time work provides the makers of these films with a pretext for elaborating stylized versions of the nocturnal city. This stylization of the urban night, and of the work which transpires within it, gives us versions of what has been called a “cinematic nocturne,”² marked by a set of conventions for evoking the sensory and affective qualities of the night. I shall argue that such cinematic treatments of the night bring with them the risk that differences of all kinds – social, spatial, and material – will be subsumed within an over-arching nocturnal atmospherics which limits an understanding of the night as conflictual or heterogeneous. Finally, I will suggest that the films examined here form part of a larger contemporary context in which the social dynamics of the urban night – and of night work – are more and more held up for scrutiny and political critique. We may discern, in this corpus of films, a heightened reflexivity concerning the urban night – a collective recognition that the nighttime city, rather than simply a setting for narrative action and esthetic effects, has become a key terrain in struggles over diversity, social justice, and democratic governance.

The films to be discussed here join a long history of media representations of those who work in the night. In her history of the 19th-century Parisian night in the 19th century, Simone Delattre writes of the contemporary media’s fascination with the figure of the night-time rag picker (or *chiffonnier*). The rag picker, captured in illustrations and described in accounts of night-time wanderings, was taken to express both the alterity and esthetic inexhaustibility of the urban night.³ As Delattre suggests, this figure was imagined as something more than a specialized worker who labored in the night. Popular representations rendered the rag picker in almost zoological terms as akin to a distinct night-time species, like the owl, for whom the night served as a natural habitat.

In recent films focused on those who labor in the night, we find a similar impulse to reduce night-time workers to versions of a singular species. Late-night drivers, sex workers, security personnel, small-scale merchants and others are often rendered as varieties of a distinct “night people.” As such they are taken to exemplify essential characteristics of the night, such as its accommodation of eccentricity and capacity to enchant. This reduction is often in tension with

the ethnographic or activist imperative to catalog nightworkers in their singularity, as a way of untangling the intersecting histories and systems of domination in which they are caught.

It is common, in cultural representations of the 24-hour cycle of city life, for the night to be understood as somehow “special” – more unpredictable, more fantastic, less regulated than the day. Films whose primary settings are cities will find different ways of representing this special character of the night in relation to work. Steven Jacobs, Anthony Kinik, and Eva Hielscher have shown how a common feature of the international city symphony film cycle of the 1920s and 1930s was the tendency of films like *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927; dir: Walter Ruttmann) to end with scenes of collective, night-time celebrations at the workday’s end. In what quickly became a cliché of the genre,⁴ the night was estheticized as a festive, effervescent compensation for the day-time work which was otherwise each film’s main focus. Conversely, as I have shown elsewhere, Hollywood films belonging to the “city exposé” cycle of the 1950s, like *Phenix City Story* (1955; dir.: Phil Karlson), regularly opened with documentary scenes of the nocturnal vice districts of cities, and revealed, in sensationalized montages, the forms of immoral, illegal labor (such as sex work) constitutive of a degraded night-time urban economy.⁵ In other representations of the urban night, more common than either of those, night work is represented as uneventful and repetitive until the mysterious or dangerous elements of the night intrude to disrupt routines and generate narrative action. Recent examples of such films include the Argentinian film *La Dosis* (*The Dose*, 2020; dir.: Martin Kraut) or the American *12 Hour Shift* (2020; dir.: Brea Grant), in which the languorous, dead-end character of hospital work is disrupted by acts of intense violence. In the Quebec film *Montréal la blanche* (*Montreal, White City*, 2016; dir.: Bachir Bensaddek), a night-time taxi driver finds purpose one night when a passenger – an immigrant, like him, from North Africa – presents him with a mystery whose unraveling now preoccupies him.

In the city symphony film, the festive urban night is typically a refuge from labor; in the urban exposé the night is saturated by work in its most degraded forms. In the last group of films, which deal with the puncturing of routine, night work represents a social disconnection and loneliness which narratives will work to overcome. It is in films of this latter group that the oppressive, sometimes precarious character of night work is usually most obvious. These are also, in many cases, films in which characters whose race, ethnicity or class have rendered them marginal and disadvantaged may assume narrative agency, shedding their status as invisible people of the night and finding new forms of solidarity or community.

Night films and “The Long 2020”

I have long been interested in films set wholly or predominantly in the night, but during what some cultural theorists have called “The Long 2020” of the Covid-19 pandemic these seemed to arrive in greater numbers than ever before.⁶ Some of the night-centered films released during this period were independent works of fiction or documentary; others were aimed more obviously at commercial markets. From among a much larger list, I have chosen six films for discussion here. All of these, the *Internet Movie Database* tells us, had release dates of 2019 or 2020, though in most cases their distribution was interrupted (or diverted to online platforms) by the Covid-19 pandemic. The corpus to be examined here is as follows:

- The Belgian feature *Ghost Tropic* (2019; dir.: Bas Devos), a fictionalized narrative of an immigrant woman who, missing her bus after her night shift as a cleaner, must walk home through the Brussels night;

- Two French-language features: the Swedish film *Lucky One* (2019, dir.: Mia Engberg and Margaux Guillemard) and *La Nuit Venue* (2019; dir.: Frédéric Farrucci), both of which center on relationships between professional drivers and sex workers in the Parisian night;
- A French fiction feature, *Police (Night Shift)* (2020; dir. Anne Fontaine), which unfolds over 24 hours, following a police team as they transport a refugee to an airplane which will send him to his country of origin;
- The Brazilian film *Breve Miragem de Sol (Burning Night)* (2019; dir.: Eryk Rocha), a fictional portrait of a taxi driver working night-shifts in Rio de Janeiro;
- *Midnight Family* (2019, dir.: Luke Lorentzen), a documentary on the life of a family-run ambulance service operating at night in Mexico City.⁷

My treatment of these films is aimed less at unpacking their thematic and stylistic complexities than in suggesting some of the ways in which their basic visual and narrative features propose particular relationships between work and the urban night. However prosaic or banal their stories or themes, films set in cities at night are usually shaped by two pressures, as suggested earlier. One of these pushes each film to elaborate its own visual esthetics of the urban night (of darkness and illumination, usually), to arrive at some version of a coherent cinematic *nocturne*. The other leads films to treat the urban night more ethnographically, as a container of sorts for characters, settings, and behaviors, or as a stage on which social heterogeneity and conflict are made to reveal themselves.

In several of the films in my corpus, entrance into the night involves the crossing of a threshold marked by the beginning or conclusion of work. A character leaves work to enter the urban night (*Ghost Tropic*) or moves into the night at the moment in which work begins (*La Nuit Venue*, *Police*, *Lucky One*). The narrative purpose of opening sequences in these films is sometimes that of establishing the back stories which will explain night work and the relationships which shape it. Once this orientation has been completed, characters will venture out into the night, in scenes which are often a pretext for estheticizing views of the nocturnal city.

Ghost Tropic is exceptional among these films in that the journey into the night is a departure from work rather than a means of arriving at it. The central character, a middle-aged immigrant building cleaner, is first seen (after a brief prologue) enjoying a moment of happy sociability with her workmates on a break. She then leaves the worksite as her work ends, but her routine journey home is disrupted when she falls asleep and misses a transit connection. For the rest of the film she walks home along nocturnal city streets, her itinerary punctuated by a series of encounters.

In *La Nuit Venue*, a young Chinese man assumes a job as night driver in order to pay off the debt incurred by his immigration to France. His boss explains the requirements of his new position before sending him out, alone, to find customers in the Parisian night. In *Police*, which unfolds over a 24-hour period, the work routines of the day introduce us to disparate characters who slowly converge, along parallel lines of character development, to form a group sent on a night-time mission (that of taking a political refugee to the airport for deportation). In the more formally experimental *Lucky One*, long takes of automobile drives through moody Parisian streets at the film's beginning serve as visual backdrops to a dialogue between unseen characters (the male driver and a female narrator) which establishes key aspects of the story to follow.

In these films, the characters' movement into the night takes them into highly stylized versions of the nocturnal city. A pervasive esthetics of the night subsumes their individuality, transforming them from specific kinds of workers into one among multiple species for whom the night is a habitat. In these films, it is easy to understand sex-trafficking gangsters, predatory business men, burned-out drivers, night-time shop clerks, building cleaners and prostitutes as

collective “night people,” bound together less by a complex system of economic exploitation than by the coherent, stylized atmosphere in which they are collectively immersed.

Central characters in all of the four films discussed so far are immigrants – the Maghrebi female cleaner in *Ghost Tropic*, the night-time driver in *La Nuit Venue* and the refugee risking deportation in *Police*. The driver in *Lucky One* refers, at one point, to his father having gone back to “his country,” but it is the Ukrainian prostitute with whom he becomes entangled who most obviously embodies the figure of the immigrant. Each of these films may be read at a surface level as revealing the exclusion and exploitation to which an immigrant population is subject. It is clear in each case that the night work in which these characters are engaged is one symptom of their economic and social marginality. At the same time, however, these immigrant figures cannot fully elude an estheticization which makes their otherness emblematic of the imagined alterity and non-conformity of those who populate the night. The figure of the immigrant night worker is easily received, in these and other cinematic constructions of the nocturnal city, as a token of the endless, exotic variety of the night.

In this respect, the key challenge in representing the night-time labor of cities is that of avoiding what I would call the “atmospheric temptation.” By this I designate the urge to reduce all represented elements of the night – its people, settings, actions – to expressions of a single state of being, endowed with the coherence of a unitary atmosphere. The temptation here is one which Friedlind Riedel has identified in her study of music, sound, and atmospheres. Moving through prior theorizations of the concept of atmosphere, she finds them reliant on notions of what Schmitz calls the “internally diffuse meaningfulness” of situations, or what Fuchs names their “unitary dynamic Gestalt.”⁸ The risk of so many representations of the night, and of night-work in particular, is not simply that they are estheticized, adorned with the marks of long-congealed stylistic figures for representing the night, but that the unity of the stylistic blanket laid over the urban night might block the perception of heterogeneity or difference. Riedel poses the fundamental question in this way: “But how can an atmosphere be homogeneous at the same time that the affective entrainment of individual bodies is potentially heterogeneous?”⁹

We might pursue Reidel’s critique of homogenizing ideas of atmosphere further by returning to the example of *Ghost Tropic*. Reviews have noted the variety of political impulses which appear to underlie the film, which was made in the wake of the 2016 Brussels bombings. The critic Ben Sachs describes it as a film about “life, death, and the state of the globalized world.”¹⁰ These themes, which have little to do with the night, run as one thread through the film, but they constitute a thematic corridor around which the film assembles elaborate versions of a night-time esthetic whose roots are at some distance from these themes. The visual style of the film, David Perrin notes, evokes the lonely urban paintings of Edward Hopper.¹¹ I would also suggest that the film is dominated by a night-time gaze on desolate urban passage ways, like tunnels and peripheral roads, which have become common in artful representations of the contemporary city at night. Both of these stylistic complexes – the one rooted in canonical mid-20th-century painting, the other typical of recent visual renderings of the infrastructural city – seemingly impose homogenizing atmospherics which, in Reidel’s critique, paper over social or material heterogeneity.

Still, the narrative of *Ghost Tropic* is carefully structured as a series of encounters between distinct inhabitants of the night, most of them engaged in night-time labor (a security guard in a retail shop, the worker in a convenience store). While we might see these persons as familiar examples of a unitary “night people,” we might also follow Reidel in her effort to partially rehabilitate the notion of atmosphere. If stylized night-time worlds are only simulations of coherence, that simulation might nevertheless, Reidel suggests, hold out the possibility of

community. In other words, we might see the subsumption of different characters within a shared, stylized atmosphere as a way of mending social fractures rather than simply concealing them.¹² The overarching stylization of the nocturnal city and its inhabitants may support the hopeful promise of *Ghost Tropic*, whose “people of the night” manifest the virtues of recognition and solidarity in brief words or small acts that allow us to glimpse the possibility of community.

The films discussed so far open in ways which take us from scenes of encounter and instruction into the deep night of work. Two other films begin in the very midst of such work. The opening of the Brazilian film *Breve Miragem de Sol* (*Burning Night*) shows its central character, a night-time taxi driver in Rio de Janeiro, driving through a chaotic visual jumble of kaleidoscopic colors amidst the cacophonous overlaying of police calls, crowd noise and the chatter of a WhatsApp chat group of taxi drivers. The first scenes of *Midnight Family*, a documentary about a family of private ambulance drivers in Mexico City, catch their characters paused between missions, washing the blood of a patient just delivered from the vehicle’s walls, then cruising city streets waiting for new calls which will take them to the victims of automobile accidents or violent altercations.

The narrative structure of both of these films is that of the “round,” the repeated visit to a series of spaces or situations. I borrow and adapt the notion of the nocturnal “round” from Marcus Anthony Hunter’s analysis of patterns of human movement within African-American nightlife. Hunter’s focus is on encounters occurring within single spaces (like nightclubs), but I am extending it to encompass, as well, repeated patterns of movement through cities as a whole.¹³ The work of the taxi driver in *Breve Miragem* leads him out, night after night, in search of customers at those places (like downtown nightspots) where they are likely to congregate. In a pattern which solidifies as the film unfolds, he moves from the streets back to the taxi station, into a restaurant frequented by his fellow drivers, and only occasionally to his empty home.¹⁴

A roughly similar logic of round and repetition structures *Midnight Family*, whose family of ambulance drivers heads out each night in search of the ill or wounded in Mexico City. In both films, the difficulty of making a living is absorbed within a more general sense of urban disorder or collapse. In *Breve Miragem de Sol*, the deterioration of social relations in Rio de Janeiro runs parallel to the deepening of the central character’s psychic despair. In *Midnight Family*, the difficulty of work is rooted in the chaos of the loosely-organized emergency health care system of Mexico City, with its hospitals of variable honesty, its cut-throat competition among ambulance operators, and its scattered infrastructures for the provisioning of gasoline, food, and sleep. As each film unfolds, the visual rendering of the city seems more coherent and stylized: amber lights crowd close to the taxi in *Breve Miragem de Sol*, producing the sense of a city in flames. Metallic structures reflecting illumination, like traffic lights, vehicles, gas stations, and hospital stretchers fill many of the scenes of *Midnight Family*, adding to the overall sense, consistent through the film, that there is no place or time for rest.

The structure of the *round* is appropriate to films which show us characters with little hope of breaking out of work routines which are both economically precarious and physically debilitating. The force of the round as narrative pattern is such that scenes of possible respite or escape within it – the moments spent at home with family, or in states of rest and private leisure – are experienced as fleeting intervals in which daylight briefly and weakly interrupts each film’s steady immersion into weighty, oppressive nocturnal atmospheres. While, in films like *La nuit venue*, *Lucky Man*, and *Police*, the night’s assumption of a stylistic unity might be seen to block recognition of the social relationships which structure nocturnal labor, the stylized atmospherics which envelop the worlds of *Breve Miragem de Sol* and *Midnight Families* efficiently express the totalizing character of the forces which oppress and entrap each film’s main characters.

A broader politics of the night

I have already suggested that the large number of recent films centering on night-time work coincides with a new, collective interest in the urban night across several fields, including the realms of urban governance and subaltern politics. While connections between these films and this broader public interest in the urban night are not always direct or acknowledged, I suggest that films such as those analyzed here are evidence of a contemporary “reflexivity” about the night. This reflexivity is evident in its simplest form in the number of films which use “night” or “midnight” as part of their title. More broadly, these films reveal an awareness of the night’s contemporary status as a key terrain of social, economic, and cultural transformations within the present-day city.

These transformations are of various sorts, and unevenly distributed around the world, but their international simultaneity should not be under-estimated. Since the late 2000s, we have seen public recognition that the night-time of cities invites (and perhaps requires) new forms of governance – such as “night mayors” or “Night Czars” – to attend to those features of the night which conventional urban administration has ignored or excessively stigmatized.¹⁵ Since 1989 as well, the world has seen the expansion of new kinds of nocturnal cultural events, like *NUIT blanche* arts festivals or Museum Nights.¹⁶ These events have moved key sectors of consecrated cultural life deeper into the night, in what we might see as a sustained attempt to cleanse the urban night of its long-standing associations with risk, crime, and the excessive consumption of alcohol or drugs. Political demonstrations, whose principal ritual was once the daytime march down city streets, have more and more assumed the form of the nocturnal gathering or occupation, and political struggles by women and racial minorities for “the right to the city” have found more specific expression in the renewed claim to a “right to the night.”¹⁷ The notion of a “night-time economy,” advanced since the 1990s by economists and adopted by city governments, has come more recently to involve a more pointed attention to the inequities of night-time labor, in which women, immigrant populations, and other historically disadvantaged workers play a disproportionate role.¹⁸

Roughly coincident with all of these developments has been the observable growth, within and between academic disciplines, of a scholarly field called “night studies,” grounded in international seminars and conferences, special issues of journals, books, and collaborative research projects. The largest number of all of these signs of “night studies” came in 2019 and 2020, the period in which the films in my corpus were released.¹⁹ While any one of these developments might have remained confined to its particular sphere of operation and influence, their historical coincidence has resulted in a steady circulation of people and ideas from one sphere to another. The “night mayors” of cities have appeared on panels with “night studies” academics discussing issues of night-time governance and, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, both have collaborated with the night-time cultural sector to address the question of how the culture of the night might be restored or reinvented.²⁰

If the ever-expanding corpus of recent films focused on the night does not address or reference such developments in direct ways, these works have nevertheless emerged in a context in which the night-time of cities is the object of thick, sustained reflection. My corpus of feature films from 2019–2020 participates, alongside shorter documentary works, research projects, books, and other textual forms (like pamphlets and podcasts), within a broader cultural complex in which the night has become ever more explicitly a “thing”: a recognizable object of public policy, artistic engagement, and scholarly interest.²¹ This collective reflection on the night has been one part of the larger, international mobilization around questions of social justice, racism, and diversity which reached its greatest intensity in 2020. Key to a new politics of the night has

been the acknowledgment that, in contemporary struggles over gentrification, housing, gender equity, racial inclusion, cultural expression and stable, meaningful employment, the night is central. It is difficult to disentangle the films in my corpus from these political understandings of the night, even when the latter have not marked the films in obvious, acknowledged ways. Within the hazy temporality of the Covid-19 pandemic, it would have been easy to read most of these films as little more than badly-timed remnants of pre-Covid visions of the urban night, now rendered slightly obsolete (and nostalgic) or curiously historical. I would suggest, however, that the images of night-time risk, precarity, and solitude which run through these films might find new resonance, not only in pandemic conditions of lockdown or curfew, but amidst new recognition of the precarious and undervalued character of night-time labor.

Notes

- 1 I owe many thanks to Erica Stein and Brendan Kredell, co-editors of this volume, for their highly productive suggestions for revision.
- 2 The notion of a “cinematic nocturne” is developed at length in Judith Langendorff, *Le nocturne et l'émergence de la couleur: cinéma et photographie* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2021).
- 3 Simone Delattre, *Les douze heures noires: La nuit à Paris au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2003), 326.
- 4 Steven Jacobs, Anthony Kinik, and Eva Hielscher, “Introduction: The city symphony phenomenon,” in *The City Symphony Phenomenon: Cinema, Art, and Urban Modernity between the Wars*, eds. Steven Jacobs, Anthony Kinik, and Eva (New York and London: Routledge, 2019), 9.
- 5 Will Straw, “Urban confidential: The lurid city of the 1950s,” in *The Cinematic City*, ed. David B. Clarke (London: Routledge, 1997), 110–28.
- 6 See, among other developments of the notion of “The Long 2020,” the series of talks with that title organized by the Centre for 21st Century Studies at the University of Milwaukee. “Events – The Long 2020,” accessed Aug. 15, 2021 <https://uwm.edu/c21/events/the-long-2020/>.
- 7 This list might have included at least four other films, each of which unfolds over a single night, but none of these were centred in an obvious way on work: *Caminhos na noite* (2020; dir. Douglas Oliveira) and *Noctambulos* (2019; dir. Arturo Baltazar), two shorts about men walking through cities at night, made in Brazil and Mexico, respectively; the American film *The Sleepless* (2020; dir. Michael DiBiasio-Ornelas), in which an African American man and a white woman, both insomniacs, walk and talk through the course of a New York City night; and the Ivory Coast film (and Oscar nominee) *La Nuit des Rois* (*Night of the Kings*) (2020; dir. Philippe Lacôte), which centers on a prisoner’s attempt to save his life by entertaining his fellow prisoners with the telling of a story.
- 8 Friedlind Riedel, “Atmospheric relations: Theorising music and sound as atmosphere,” in *Music as Atmosphere: Collective Feelings and Affective Sounds* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 5. See, for related ideas, Andrew McGraw, “Atmosphere as a concept for ethnomusicology: Comparing the Gamelatron and Gamelan,” *Ethnomusicology* 60, no. 1 (Winter 2016), 125–47.
- 9 Riedel, “Atmospheric relations: Theorizing music and sound as atmosphere,” p. 17.
- 10 Ben Sachs, “CIFF puts new voices in the spotlight,” *Chicago Reader*, Oct. 16, 2019, <https://chicagoreader.com/film/ciff-puts-new-voices-in-the-spotlight/>
- 11 David Perrin, “State of the festival: Viennale 2019, the future is present,” MUBI, Nov. 26, 2019, accessed May 15, 2021, <https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/state-of-the-festival-viennale-2019-the-future-is-present>
- 12 Riedel, p. 17.
- 13 Marcus Anthony Hunter. “The nightly round: Space, social capital, and urban black nightlife.” *City and Community* 9, no. 2 (2010), 165–86.
- 14 These places and encounters recall those of Martin Scorsese’s 1976 film *Taxi Driver*.
- 15 See, for a history and analysis of new forms of night-time governance, Andreina Seijas and Mirik Milan Gelders., “Governing the night-time city: The rise of night mayors as a new form of urban governance after dark,” *Urban Studies* 58, 2 (2021), 316–34.
- 16 See Graeme Evans, “Hold back the night: Nuit Blanche and all-night events in capital cities,” *Current Issues in Tourism* 15, 2 (2012), 35–49.
- 17 For a discussion of the “nocturnalization” of political protest, see, for example, Robert Shaw, “Pushed to the margins of the city: The urban night as a timespace of protest at Nuit Debout, Paris,” *Political Geography*, 59 (2017), 117–25; on the feminist “right to the night,” see Catherine Deschamps, “Le

genre du droit à la nuit Parisienne,” in *Cohabiter les nuits urbaines*, eds. Alain Montandon, Florian Guérin, and Edna Hernandez Gonzalez (Paris, l’Harmattan, 2018), pp. 23–37.

- 18 See, for example, Julius-Cezar MacQuarie, “While others sleep: The essential labor of migrant nightshift workers,” *Society for the Anthropology of Work*, 2020, accessed May 15, 2021, <https://saw.americananthro.org/pub/while-others-sleep-the-essential-labor-of-migrant-nightshift-workers/release/1>
- 19 For a detailed overview of all of these developments, see Will Straw, Luc Gwiazdzinski, Marco Maggioli, “The emerging field of ‘Night Studies’: Steps towards a genealogy,” in *Night Studies: Regards croisés sur les nouveaux visages de la nuit*, eds. Luc Gwiazdzinski, Marco Maggioli, and Will Straw, eds. (Grenoble: Editions Elya, 2020). English-language version available online at <https://willstraw.files.wordpress.com/2020/06/ns-conclusion-anglais-26p-26mai20.pdf>.
- 20 See, for example, the various volumes of the *Global Night Time Recovery Plan*, published in 2020 and 2021. Accessed May 20, 2021. www.nighttime.org/recoveryplan/.
- 21 I owe this sense of “thing” to my doctoral student Alican Koc. See, among many examples of this activity, Martin Kohout and Dan Meththananda, eds., *Night Shifter* (TLTR Press, no place of publication, 2018); the London-based *Nightworkshop* project, <https://nightworkshop.myportfolio.com/about>; and the multi-university European research project *Night spaces | migration, culture and integration in Europe*. My blog “The Urban Night” tracks the release of new media materials concerning the night: <https://theurbannight.com/>



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