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The Night and the Authoritarian Cultural Nightmare

The night symbolizes the freeing up of the deepest, most uncontrollable instincts, which are also the creative drive. Our most direct precedent is romanticism and its excesses. Both in content and in form, urban musical culture arose from the spaces of prohibition and otherness inhabited by nineteenth-century poets and intellectuals: full of passion, intensity, the sublimation of instincts, but also of alcohol and absinthe. The scandals of the *poètes maudits* (accursed poets) have come down to us as an inspiration in the archetype they created for the night and its excesses.

Jazz, boleros, rock, and electronic music have all depended on nocturnal ramblings to create and disseminate almost all their varieties and create specialized audiences.

Even the music of academe, although performed in concert halls, has found a privileged place in alternative forums. We could not understand the work of Michael Nyman, Angelo Badalamenti, Philip Glass, or Stockhausen outside the hybrid circuits of film and those non-conventional venues located in cultural surroundings, including universities and cabarets.

In the early twentieth century, cabarets, and cafés became the places where the emerging aesthetic avant-gardes reverberated. The night was and has been the great meeting place for different groups for creating cultural and aesthetic trends and disruptive ideas, as well as the succession of generational emblems: from the Voltaire Cabaret, which gave birth to Dadaism, to Studio 54, the prototype of disco culture, Birdland, and the Village Vanguard, venues where jazz musicians like Miles Davis, Bill Evans, and John Coltrane transformed the music of the

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last century, and the techno musical circuits in Detroit in the 1980s or Berlin, with its Tresor, the club with the most influence and tradition.

In Mexico, as mentioned above, it was literary cafés and cabarets where the new rhythms and dances first appeared. Generations like the Stridentists and the Contemporaries met up at them—even in the most sordid of them, like those Salvador Novo describes in *La estatua de sal (Pillar of Salt)*.¹ The Café de Nadie (Nobody's Café) became the emblematic home to the Stridentists, the place where they discussed and designed publications like the legendary *Irradiador* (Radiator magazine);² while the Café París was a gathering place for the Contemporaries and the Workshop Generation (called that after the magazine of the same name), whose members included essayist and poet Octavio Paz, poet Efraín Huerta, narrator José Revueltas, poet Octavio Novaro, and playwright Rafael Solana, among others.³

International phenomena like the mambo, the chachachá, and the bolero gained popularity in cabarets, nightclubs, and even tent shows.⁴ All of that great cultural effervescence came crashing down due to a moral crusade by the government and greater state intervention in cultural content. For the Mexico governed by the then-hegemonic Institutional Revolutionary Party, economic stability, social control, and cultural corporatism were supreme values, at least for the official ideology. All of this came together in the early 1950s to create a moral crusade by the enemy of the night, Ernesto P. Uruchurtu (1906-1997), for 14 years mayor of what was then Mexico City's Federal District, from 1952 to 1966.

The work of great authors developed in that Mexico in which the paternalistic state intervened and controlled nightlife, deciding what was good or bad for several generations. Writers Carlos Fuentes, José Emilio Pacheco, José Joaquín Blanco, and Carlos Monsiváis would live in the country that contrasted with the one whose cultural life had seduced intellectuals who arrived from the world over like Edward Weston, Tina Modotti, Malcolm Lowry,

Aldous Huxley, and William S. Burroughs. As late as 1955, Jack Kerouac would have a short-lived initial experience as he sought to free up his literary impulses in communion with Mexico's rich, diverse, original culture.

Octavio Paz characterized that state control of cultural and political life in his essay *El ogro filantrópico* (The Philanthropic Ogre) (1979). In that same vein, Mexico's production became virginal and good, in the face of the evil, decadent influences of foreign cultures, alien to our national idiosyncrasy, the family, and the institutionalized ideals of the Mexican Revolution, a movement *cum* single party and monolithic power.

The loss was incommensurable: until before the moral crusade, of all the musical licenses between the United States and Mexico, 80 percent were Mexican. Not only was war declared against cabarets, nightclubs, and spaces frequented by the young, but also people were arrested for how they looked in raids organized in which anyone who went to a certain place or a meeting the authorities considered suspicious was detained; and any meeting of young people was considered suspicious *a priori*.

By the end of the 1960s, young people began to broaden out their tastes based on radio, television, and magazines. Media culture appeared on the scene and its effects were immediate. Rock became a popular, transgressing medium. A Mexican variant of rock emerged, which demanded its own cafés and meeting places. Luis Buñuel offers us that apocalyptic image in his film *Simon of the Desert* (1965), depicting Silvia Pinal dancing in a café while the group Naftalina plays wild, strident tunes.

It just doesn't let up: the October 2, 1968 repression is followed by that of June 10, 1971, events that consolidate a policy of control, authoritarianism, and cancellation of Mexico's democratic life. Those who were only fighting for a cultural transformation received a disproportionate answer after the Avándaro Rock and Wheels Festival (State of Mexico, September 11 and 12, 1971): all centers, halls, cafés, and other spaces where young people got together, including rock festivals, were closed.

In response to this brutal control emerged what were called "funky holes," so-called by writer Parménides García Saldaña, who would be their chronicler and would explain their ideological underpinnings, characterizing them as a lumpen proletarian re-creation of the privileged venues that played the rock to the taste of the elites in Mexico's large cities. Alex Lora, the leader of the Tri rock

group, bluntly describes this state of things in their song *Abuse of Authority*: “The only one who’s going to be able to play is Díaz Ordaz’s son.” This is in reference to the fact that Alfredo, the son of Mexico’s President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964-1970), would be the only one they would respect and not arrest for the way he looked, for being in the funky holes or being caught in a raid.

By the 1980s, everything continued under government control, but some spaces survived as symbols of cultural resistance: funky holes, clandestine festivals, and the Chopo University Museum. When writer Ángeles Mastretta became its first director, this National Autonomous University of Mexico off-campus space opened its doors to popular music, blues, and rock, previously exclusively found in the funky holes, as well as to the new 1980s music, like the progressive rock group MCC (Música y Contracultura) and *Las Insólitas Imágenes de Aurora* (The Unheard-of Images of Aurora), which in turn gave rise to *Los Caifanes* (The Pimps), today the *Jaguares*.

A countercultural space *par excellence* was also born at the El Chopo University Museum: the Chopo (Black Popular) Street Market. Though not part of the nocturnal circuit, its activities continued into the Saturday nights through concerts, *chelerías* (bars where mainly beer was served, or “brewskerias”), diners that turned into improvised nightclubs, and the festivals that could exceptionally get permits or were held in areas that had been swimming holes like the Bahía or the Olímpico in Pantitlán, the eastern part of the city.

In 1989, the image of the mayor/authoritarian father-figure, guardian of Mexico City’s morals, Manuel Camacho Solís, was demolished in a public debate with intellectual Carlos Monsiváis. The recently appointed mayor announced Mexico’s economic modernization with the same authoritarian paradigm;⁵ Monsi, as the writer was affectionately known, questioned the basis for that paradigm: the round-ups or police raids. Camacho Solís defended them, as well as his political-moral actions against both male and female homosexuals, rockers, or just young people, who he would throw in jail for a night or a few days simply for the way they looked. After losing the debate, the mayor finally stopped the raids and proposed legal reforms to protect the constitutional rights that had been violated from the time that Uruchurtu began his moral crusade.

That same year, the government opened up and allowed the official radio, the Mexican Institute of Radio

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(the IMER group), headed up by Gerardo Estrada, to broadcast the late-twentieth-century alternative musical genres on its station *Estéreo Joven* (Young Stereo) and the *IMEROCK* specials. This change opened up the radio to Nacho Desorden, on the program *With the Punkta Hairdo*, from the Lost Acapulco group; Edmundo Navas, the director of *Opción Sónica*; Benjamin Salcedo from *Altered Frequencies* and current editor of *Rolling Stone México* magazine; and my program, *xx-xxi Music of Two Centuries*, were productions where we flooded the airwaves with the music, concerts, and performances from U.S., European, Canadian, and Latin American indie movement record companies.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the nightclub circuit scene diversified: rock, disco, electronic music. Places that offered these and other options opened up; we witnessed the “reveal” of venues offering these and other options, for people that Monsiváis called “those reluctant to accept extreme safety,” audiences who wanted to soak themselves in sensations, adventures, and free themselves from the moral order. Those spaces, including those of sexual otherness, where you could find the wealth and sins of the city, were the 9, *La Tirana* (The Female Tyrant), *Metal*, *El Catorce* (Fourteen), *La Diabla* (The She-devil), *La Chaqueta* (Handjob), *Rockotitlán*, *Lucc*, *Rock Stock*, and *Medusas*, among many others.

Radio also diversified with stations like *Rock 101*, piloted by Luis Gerardo Salas, and the preppy and aspirational *WFM*, captained by film-maker Alejandro González Iñárritu when he was a radio announcer and producer.

In 2000, the Mexico City government, headed by the federal opposition leader Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas (1997-1999) opened up public plazas like the central *Zócalo* square and the Monument to the Revolution to mass rock concerts, electronic music, and hybrid genres.⁶ The unthinkable happened: hundreds of thousands of young people attended these big productions and musical proposals celebrated that new freedom with groups like *Café Tacvba*, *Manu Chao*, *Mr. Coconut*, and festivals like *Radical Mestizo*, *Tecnogeist*, and *Berlin’s Loveparade*. Mexico City

became one of the world's big cultural circuits, alongside cities like Berlin, New York, Montreal, London, etc. But, given the lack of exercise and respect for constitutional rights, free spaces are intermittent in Mexico.

In 2002, Mexico City Mayor Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2000-2005) canceled mass festivals in the Zócalo and took measures against the Tecnogeist Festival. Police Chief Marcelo Ebrard was the operator of the government actions, even threatening to use the police to prevent the parade and concert in the Zócalo.⁷⁸ For certain sectors of society, the mayor was reviving Uruchurtu's spirit and becoming the authoritarian father-figure of Mexico City youth. But he was defeated when Tecnogeist turned into a political demonstration in defense of culture. In response to the cancelation of certain cultural activities, two rights were included in amendments to the Constitution: the access to culture and respect for creative freedom.

Paradoxically, in the last two decades, an enormous number of mass concerts of all the twentieth-century currents have been held. This is despite the fact that the state gradually adopted a more conservative cultural outlook and policy and conceded spaces to the monopoly of entertainment promoters like CIE-OCESA. Now, the pandemic means that the night of culture will not be liberating, but a night of negligence, abandon, de-capitalization, precariousness, and unemployment for thousands of artists and workers in the field.

The spirit of Uruchurtu survives in the cultural policy of the populist, relief-based governments that won the 2018 elections and now administer some states and the federal government. To austerity and induced poverty are added the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. While countries like Germany, the United States, Canada, France, Sweden, the United Kingdom, China, and Japan talk

of investing billions, in Mexico, we are being given up for dead. As Monsi used to say a few years ago, urban violence and crime add up to laying siege to the night. Perhaps the only alternative is to take back the streets, fill them with culture, and finally bury any and all attempts at an authoritarian state. ■■■

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Notes

- 1 Writer Carlos Monsiváis considered this book, written in 1945, the underground autobiography of Salvador Novo (1904-1974), Mexico City's official chronicler. Translated into English by Marguerite Feitlowitz; introduction by Carlos Monsiváis, and published by the UTP. [Editor's Note.]
- 2 This legendary space, located on what is today Álvaro Obregón Avenue, was baptized that by Stridentist poet Manuel Maples Arce because "there was nobody . . . in the establishment. He went into another room, where there was just a bubbling coffee pot. He served himself, went back to his table, and drank the coffee. Since nobody came to charge him, he paid nobody, and left a tip for a waitress he never saw. That's how it was, and that's how he came back other nights to the café where he never saw anybody." "El Café de Nadie," in Wikiméxico, Centro de Estudios de Historia de México, <http://www.wikimexico.com/articulo/el-cafe-de-nadie>. [Editor's Note.]
- 3 Known as the "cathedral of coffee," the Café París has been a meeting place for artists and intellectuals, as well as the birthplace of many cultural anecdotes. *Enciclopedia de la Literatura en México* (ELEM), <http://www.elem.mx/estgrp/datos/1322>. [Editor's Note.]
- 4 A kind of traveling theater popular in Mexico in the early twentieth century, which disappeared in the late 1960s. [Editor's Note.]
- 5 At that time, Mexico City did not elect its mayor; Camacho Solís was a federal appointee. [Translator's Note.]
- 6 Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas was the first elected Mexico City mayor in late twentieth century. [Translator's Note.]
- 7 The government permit to hold the festival was conditioned on guaranteeing respect for security norms for attendees, residents, and the physical space; the authorities and the organizers were not able to come to an agreement on this. Fabrizio León and Jorge Caballero, "Definen hoy la realización del Tecnogeist," *La Jornada*, April 2, 2002, <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2002/04/02/08a1esp.php?printver=1>. [Editor's Note.]
- 8 López Obrador is currently Mexico's president and Ebrard is its foreign minister. [Translator's Note.]



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