Graciela Martínez-Zalce*

Night of Ice, Night of Fire

Border cinema is characterized, among other things, by building its stories based on stereotypes both of the characters populating the border area and of the illicit activities that take place there. The space-time of the night is another way in which border cinema develops its narrative, reinforcing or deconstructing the stereotype that darkness favors the illicit. One example of this is *Paradox of Praxis 5: Sometimes We Dream as We Live/Sometimes We Live as We Dream* (2013),[1] a video by the Belgium artist residing in Mexico, Francis Alÿs.

Both to the north and the south of the United States, border spaces have been reconfigured in cinema as places where porousness oscillates and unleashes conflicts. One example is the contraband of goods, arms, and drugs, human trafficking, confrontations between authorities on both sides of both borders, and crime, as though being located on national borders gives the space the connotation of crime and danger.

Refuting this stereotype, however, is the following film, which deals with the night to comment on the space from the darkness.

Night of Fire

Just as darkness is a luxury for some, the relationship between night and sleep is a luxury for others. The nighttime space-time also belongs to those who work to provide services to those with the privilege of sleeping or being entertained.[2]

* Researcher and director of the UNAM Center for Research on North America; zalce@unam.mx.

> The inhabitants of the night are those who sleep and those who revel —but they also include the security staff, bar staff, bottle collectors, and police of the working night. . . . Night's capacity for violence cannot be ignored. . . . Joys of night walking are haunted by fears sharpened by instinct and experience. Night is conflated with the unknown and with darkness in the symbolic imagination.[3]

Francis Alÿs's *Paradox of Praxis 5* begins with the epigraph "Sometimes We Dream as We Live/Sometimes We Live as We Dream. Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, November 2013." In English, the viewer can appreciate the poetic play on words; in Spanish, the coordinates of time and place: the border region. And, in the space of film, the night to connote the border and embrace all its inhabitants.

Darkness, an incandescent point of light and a trajectory, a line over the Line.[4] Why fire? Why Juárez?

Alÿs has traveled through other cities and borders exercising a poetics of movement; most of his travels have been those of a daytime walker accompanied by the light of different latitudes, of Europe's grey suns or Mexico's luminous ones. And this temporality is what makes the fifth paradox in Alÿs's work a very different text: the night, literally lit by a burning object, is the space he chooses for wandering, accompanied by a camera that follows him at very different distances.

In the foreground, a ball of fire, and a man's feet begin walking on sandy ground, kicking. It's nighttime. The only light comes from the ball. On this trajectory in a city stigmatized by the violence characteristic of the Mexico-U.S. border, Alÿs traces a line on the Line in a piece different because it takes place in darkness, the leading role played by a glowing light; and, based on that difference, the artist presents a poetic, political reading of what goes on in Juárez.

The road takes him to an populated space: a store and some poor homes; in one of them a person sits in front of his house with the door open and the light on. Darkness in the street: poverty in the neighborhood.

Schøllhammer thinks that fascination for the streets can be explained because that's where people's lives and artistic endeavor coincide.[5] Alÿs often brings with him an object that defines a specific route and behavior in its performative displacement through the city: a main objective of these journeys, he says, is to formulate a critique of modern disassociation from the different dimensions of life and at the same time show the complexity of the relationships between space, society, and art.

The ball is that object, and it functions not only as the definer of the route, but as a guide: its light, which erupts in the blackness of the city's outskirts, points out that darkness characterizes its poor areas. When the ball separates from the ground, the fire fills the screen. The ball lights up the houses and the silence of the suburban night is interrupted by the sound of the fire.

Alÿs is particularly interested in intervening in spaces where people come together to reveal the many dimensions that make them up.

Tim Edensor has noted that, in the shorts that document Francis Alÿs's interventions, sound is a revealing component of space.[6] In *Paradox of Praxis 5*, the sound of the flaming ball in effect indicates aspects of the city such as the consistency of the soil or the velocity of movement; sometimes it occupies the video's entire audio track and at other times, it must compete with the noises of the city.

Edensor explains how the act of walking gives the viewer an experience of space-time: the rhythms of the walk make it possible to have a particular flow of experience such as attachment or detachment, physical immersion, mental wandering, memory, and recognition and unfamiliarity. As it walks, the body weaves a contingent path, partially conditioned by the physical characteristics of place.[7]

The inhabitants of this nighttime Juárez work in entertainment. Female legs in platform sandals and miniskirts: prostitution accompanied by the constant barking of dogs. A shot of a walker through the rubble of a building: the reality of a part of the city that functions as a metaphor for the rest of urban life.

Inhabiting the night does not always mean that we live as we dream nor that we dream as we live.

More demolished buildings, the city in decay. The man comes upon paved streets with street lights and passing cars. The nightclubs start: La Rubia, Club Pigallie. On one corner, a puzzled man lit by the ball against a wall painted with a sign for a *palenque* performance arena: the walker crosses the avenue. Techno music, a hybridization typical of border areas, pours out of a truck with polarized windows.

Alÿs is particularly interested in intervening in spaces where people come together to reveal the many dimensions that make them up; for that reason, his artistic interest and political commentary end up being a logic of response to a border city like Ciudad Juárez; a city that, in the year Alÿs walked through it, was struggling to stop being the world's most dangerous.[8]

Another wide shot: the camera opens up to put the walker in context. A train track crosses the avenue; once again, the man is shown with his back to the camera, and in front of him the avenue is badly lit. Buses drive by and vans are parked.

A taxi from the Lucerna Taxi Stand sports a green-and-white advertisement on top that says, "Together, Let's Clean Up Juárez," and despite the fact that its illustration shows a figure throwing garbage into a trash can, the fact that it's shot in a close-up gives it a broader meaning, since the sound track features the shrill noise of sirens. Cleaning up Juárez would imply sweeping away the violence, the threat of feminicide, the unfair working conditions in the maquila plants. We must not forget that fire is an element of expiation; when it consumes something, it performs an extreme cleansing.

The ball comes back to the foreground. The train goes on its way. The man walks down the side of a culvert and the train is now over him; the ball and the streets that once again come into the foreground return to darkness. The close-up is so tight that the fire fills the screen and the viewer can see the red, yellow, and orange overtones and the sparks: only fire and the night in a moving abstract vignette. To one side of the slope, the wayfarer once again is alone in the darkness on the dirt; the ball is once again the only source of light. When the camera moves back, the ball is a small orange dot amidst the blackness; it retreats; you can hear engines.

The fire returns to the foreground: white, blinding, with yellow, orange, red edges; it speeds up again, emitting sparks, leaving a trace. It's a latent danger: it could turn into a fire, end everything. The camera stops at a point where the viewer can see the back of the walker disappearing into the blackness, almost in silence.

Craig Epplin states that some of Alÿs's interventions are cognitive maps of the present.[9] That is, they produce the experience of space at the same time that they situate us in ideological, spatial coordinates. The means through which the artist documents his movements also occupy a central place in this cognitive mapping.

Epilogue

Lukinbeal has used the term "cinematographic geography" to describe the transdisciplinary field that studies the representation of geographical spaces in cinema and that analyzes how social and cultural meanings interrelate with space. According to this discipline, despite cinema's immateriality, films act as maps for sociocultural and sociopolitical imaginaries.[10]

The names of border cities have "a referential value. However, they construct a diegetic space underlining precisely the extratextual reference point and, therefore, giving their existence great weight in reality."[11]

The stereotype that characterizes gender joins the one that considers that night is a space-time where we are vulnerable; the film text reflects the lack of security implied in living on the border.

Darkness accentuates the precariousness and poverty; the presence of the authorities is necessary so those who must wander through the nocturnal space can feel safe. Inhabiting the night does not always mean that we live as we dream nor that we dream as we live. VM

Notes

1 *Paradox of Praxis 5: Sometimes We Dream as We Live/Sometimes We Live as We Dream,* directed by Francis Alÿs, in collaboration with Rafael Ortega, Julien Julien Devaux, Alejandro Morales, and Félix Blume (Ciudad Juárez, Mexico: Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros, 2013), http://francisalys.com/paradox-of-praxis/.
2 Sophie Hamacher, "On the Night Bus," *Night Scapegoat* no. 10 (Spring-Summer, 2017).
3 Will Straw and Christie Pearson, "Editorial," *Night Scapegoat,* no. 10 (Spring-Summer, 2017), p. 5.
4 In Mexico, and particularly in the North, the border is known as "The Line." [Translator's Note.]
5 Karl Erik Schøllhammer, "A Walk in the Invisible City," *Know Techn Pol* no. 21 (2008), pp. 144 and 148.
6 Tim Enderson, "Walking in Rhythms: Place, Regulation, Style and the Flow of Experience," *Visual Studies* vol. 1, no. 25 (2010), pp. 75-76.
7 Ibid., p. 70.
8 Óscar J. Martínez, *Ciudad Juárez. Saga of a Legendary Border City* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2018).
9 Craig Epplin, "Francis Alÿs: Maps of the Present," *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* vol. 50, no. 2 (June 2016), p. 403.
10 Graciela Martínez-Zalce, *Instrucciones para salir del limbo: arbitrario de representaciones audiovisuales de las fronteras en América del Norte* (Mexico City: CISAN, UNAM, 2016), p. 22.
11 Ibid., p. 17.