

On the transfer of cinematic nightscapes into urban context

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Abstract

Cinema has been that art, which is mostly related to the inventions and the technological development of 20th century. It is an art which emerged from the heart of the city. Thus cinema has been dealing with the city from its birth. The illustration of nightscapes in cinema provided us a wide variety of nighttime appearances of urban spaces suggesting on this way ample interpretations of them by means of different lighting treatments.

In an attempt to transfer the legendary attributes of cinematic nightscapes to the urban nightscape the respective approach for the gen-

eration of cinematic nightscapes and its applicability in the formation of urban nightscapes will be examined and evaluated. Provided the tall tale, which has been spun to serve the fascination of cinema (as happened in film noir, expressionistic films etc.), conquers the city, this cinema will then evolve to its absolute form of lively shadows emancipating itself from the enveloped space of a hall.

Keywords:

cinema, night landscape, illumination, city by night, film direction

“At the end of the 19th century, together with a series of new ideas and pioneering inventions, a new utopia prevailed in the world: the transformation of night into day.” It is clear that such a development, which was assisted by the spread of light powered by electricity, in particular in the large urban centres, had significant repercussions, on an economic and philosophical level, but also on a psychological one. Modern man began to view his night under new conditions, penetrating it in particular and altering its profile, something that had a direct influence on the way in which he lit urban spaces: powerful lights that almost abolished the dark. Gradually, this violent lighting of cities became a bad habit with significant repercussions on the image of the urban landscape at night.

“Night and the city” are two notions that were connected in the cinema as well from very early on. Indeed, this phrase points to the celebrated film of the same name by Jules Dassin (fig. 1). Night becomes the emblem of the cinema, because the cinema theatre opens as night slowly descends upon the city, unravelling images of light in the darkness. Yet, the nocturnal lighting of the cities did not imitate the cinema, and has today become more of a process of wiping out the dark, rather than that which normally it should have been: showcasing the dark as a visible aesthetic event and its utilisation in the shaping of our gaze.

In this brief study we shall attempt to underscore how cinema was able to achieve precisely this second goal



(to influence the formation of the gaze of the contemporary person) and how we today could utilise the aesthetics of certain cinematic representations, in order to draw inspiration for the lighting of a city. Cinema showed, with particular mastery of lighting, figures as traces of light within the dark, disproportionately strong on the level of sensation in relation to their absolute intensity, thus forming an aesthetic model of the night that, as the experience of an imaginary substitute, subconsciously determines the expectations of an authentic version of the nocturnal atmosphere in modern life, commandeering the transgression of the limits of the representation of the night.

The formation of the urban nightscape, with the operational terms of the imaginary, cannot but be inspired by the art of light in the cinema, as there can be a corresponding setting of goals for the development of an art of lighting, which can convey aesthetic and fictional elements in the rendering of a visual reality.

It is not by chance, then, that great directors of photography of the Seventh Art, or even movie directors, were systematically involved in the design of city lighting. The shaping of an urban nightscape, as a narrative basis with cinematographic terms, is ultimately nothing other than a type of visual art, which requires the application of a directorial view. The only (and perhaps ultimately not so important) difference lies in the absence of the camera. The directness of its display in a lit space does not always constitute realism. The “artificiality” of light continues to exist just as in the cinematic experience, and it is this which serves the interpretation that the designer-director of the nightscape has in mind (fig. 2).

The “virtuality” of the otherwise completely realistic nightscape lies primarily in the “artificiality” of the lighting. It is to this that the monumental cinematic scenes of the modern nocturnal city owe their glory. When Coppola was still filming *Apocalypse Now* (the lighting effects in this film are well known) he was reading Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*, and it was this story that inspired in him the film *One from the Heart* (fig. 3). He deliberately chose nocturnal Las Vegas for the filming, because here he found the “artificiality” he required.



Storaro, the director of photography on the film, explains that the city was constructed in the studio from a collage of spaces the assembling of which gave the impression of a complete whole. The induced materialisation of the whole through the fragmentation of the sections that constitute, perhaps, its synecdoche is a common practice in cinema.

A director does nothing more than interpret, using pre-existing structures (as a city might be) or symbols (pieces, reformations, fragments). Lighting in cinema serves precisely this function of direction, to showcase, that is, the whole through the fragment.

An exceptional example as such is Federico Fellini's film *La Dolce Vita* (1964). The Fontana di Trevi, completely constructed in the Cinecittà studios, becomes an emblematic scene of nocturnal Rome (fig. 4) and Anita Ekberg's bath in the fountain is underscored by the dark foundation of the night. A night that ultimately plays host to the strangest doings of a society that is only just now beginning to conceive the consequences of the consumer path to which it had passed. The submergence of the subject within this virtual reconstruction provokes a sense of an extreme event, and not simply a sweet experience of the romantic desire that night inspires.

Lighting in cinema may be governed by an "artificiality," but its true power is liberated only when the director adopts a humanist approach to how he or she will light the world of their film, promoting their idea in the other place of the viewing of a universal human conception of the deeper meaning of the visual whole.

When Peter Greenaway filmed in Rome, in front of the Pantheon, one of the opening sequences of his film *Belly of an Architect*, he imparted the universality of this perspective with the detailed inventory of the biological influences that the monument and its creator exercise upon him. An influence that he experiences through the visual stimulation of the lit building (fig. 5). There is, in other words, an interpretation of the carving of the light, which extends towards existence itself, something that is

not the case without the commanding presence of light, in conditions that is of natural light.

The same happens, more or less, in Theo Angelopoulos's film *Eternity and a Day*. The hero, who suffers from an incurable illness, seeks a profound biological experience within the bowels of the city at night. Angelopoulos's Thessaloniki thus takes on the significance of a "character" who converses with the suffering subject. Nonetheless, the same city is interpretable through the nocturnal image that the director attributes to it.

Cinema can be an archive of our cities and their culture, of their very structures, as it constitutes an archive of human behaviours and also a memoir of the collective imaginary of any given society. As Jean Cocteau said, cinema is a dream that we all dream together. Indeed, the same thing



happens with the city at night, through its obvious publicity. The feeder of the dream can be the rigged plasticity of its nightscape.

It was on this plasticity, the result of intense light and shade, the concealing and distortion of the real, that film noir based an aesthetic that marked whole decades and was perhaps the most characteristic example in the history of cinema through which we can comprehend the transformation of the nightscape into a space for the experience of plasticity. Bennet standing underneath

the lamp-post in Fritz Lang's 1945 film *Scarlet Street* (fig. 6) is the most emblematic and so far unsurpassed symbolic nocturnal scene. This aesthetic, which is a kind of dialectic between the art of photography and cinematic expressionism, is indifferent to the exact visual contact with things, whilst it gives ground to the visual of the emotional charge. This same visual could constitute the desired content of the contemporary urban nightscape, a landscape that is not based on lighting mannerism, but which is in a position to host the myth and to narrate with the enigma of the shadows in the semi-darkness.

Let's "follow" and let's "read" one such image: "He walks and hears his footsteps in the city that is finally empty. It is four in the morning. He crosses a square, drowning in buildings, full of little tables and metal chairs, submerged in the traces... and remains of a celebration. He crosses it thinking of other things. With his memories, he walks to banish his insomnia and avoid his dreams. There is not a sound other than his steps. Until suddenly he hears a hiss the moment when ..." (fig. 7).

It is clear that our interest is maintained through the surprise, the anticipation of disruption, and the very pleasure of this disruption. The nocturnal version of the city has the ability to act similarly, with surprises in store for the disruption of its quotidian image.

What perhaps still needs to be explored, for an advanced design of the nocturnal lighting of the city, is the visual imprinting of this surprise. It is precisely on this point that a creative and close "collaboration" between cinematic

aesthetics and the lighting layout of the city can prove to be a fruitful collaboration.

Conclusions

Through the brief and certainly not exhaustive review of some significant cinematic images that have imprinted night and the city through light, we can seek a set of qualitative criteria that the nocturnal image of a city could have:

Balance: when lighting an area, an attempt is made not only to show the objects that are being lit but also to draw from its plasticity an experience analogous to that of light and shade in photography.

The identity of the space: the points that are lit at night and the corners from which these light sources are projected should create a physiognomy that functions as an interpretation of the quotidian image of the city.

Dramatisation in the mapping of the nocturnal walk: surprise, the unexpected, and the fickle in the design of the nightscape.

Creation of an underside: what is important is that which we do not light. The black background (darkness) highlights the form (lit object).

Creation of a nocturnal culture: the meaning of nocturnal culture implies a broad conception of what we ultimately expect from our visual experience at night. We believe that the aesthetic criteria (a result of a detailed processing of the circumstances of the era) is that through which a culture of light can be created.





Nocturnal lighting is a culture that has its roots in all human arts and expressions.

A good and systematic collaboration between cinematic theory and analysis with the practice of lighting could prove to be a very constructive way of approaching the formation of the urban nightscape.

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