

Lara Nielsen

The Time After NAFTA: DF's Border Time (and the Other) in Post Tenebras Lux

I think we are living now in a moment of darkness.

—Carlos Reygadas, 2013

It would seem that *Post Tenebras Lux* (2012), the fourth and most recent film by Carlos Reygadas, delivers a promise: after darkness, light. The title conjures the “wisdom book” of Job, where the passage from darkness to light is one of temporal and spiritual surrender in which recourse to rationality and the body are insufficient (Job 28:28). To revisit the material impoverishments of fortune and flesh in Job is to consider anew the tests and transformations of modernity and global inequality. But what, to invoke Jacques Rancière, is the time after NAFTA? Of what tests and judgments is this historical time made? For Reygadas, the key to unpacking the post-NAFTA era is a cinematography of presence approaching mysterious and refractive temporalities. Resisting the urge to codify

the time after NAFTA within any other likely chronology of the Americas, and decidedly refusing to concede ‘what’s done is done,’ the film rubs at the simultaneities of pasts and futures within the great fabric of creation itself, that original and inventive enterprise of imagining the world ‘made flesh.’

Within and beyond Mexico, NAFTA economies have realigned capital flows and social relations between country and city, imploding old social contracts between urban, cosmopolitan elites and the persistent coloniality of the local, still imagined as a pastoral site for home and “help.” Yet in the time after NAFTA, narcocapitalism is the only local factory that’s still hiring.¹ Reygadas examines the time after NAFTA in works that trace the elite, creative classes of Mexico City’s privileged urban milieu as it comes into contact with those who have historically been consigned to serve them. Each playing distinctive parts in the post-NAFTA service economy (including its narcocapitalist spectrum), the conflicts between them recall the dynamics of Rancière’s reading of the time after as “the time of pure material events, against which belief will be measured for as long as life will sustain it.”² Rather than simply oppose the culpability of the state and markets as developmental stages in nation-making projects (and filmmaking ones, too, as Rancière suggests), Reygadas wrestles with cinematic strategies of performing the ethnographic present in a feature film, and with the challenges of mediating the coevalness that was never only “before” or “after” NAFTA, but rather illuminates an intensification of the persistence of coloniality. The film takes place in the context of Mexico City’s “borderlands,” 50 miles to the south. Aligning Mexico DF with other global cities, the film incorporates shots from the periphery of major metropolises in the UK, Spain, and Belgium.

In interviews, Reygadas has made it clear that although critics tend to view *Post Tenebras Lux* as his most personal film and call it autobiographic, he is interested instead in “fictionalizing with documentary.”³ Billed as “a

documentary and a dream,” the film was made in a rural area of Morelos, where Reygadas and his wife Natalia built the house that appears in the film, and where they now live with their two children. The film follows a Reygadas-like character named “Juan,” but Reygadas and Natalia are portrayed by actors. *Post Tenebras Lux* premiered at the 2012 Cannes film festival, where Reygadas won the festival’s Best Director Prize. An upper-crust family drama, this is a film by and about Mexican elites, portraying the time after NAFTA in the clash between what Reygadas calls “Western” Mexicans both near and far from “non-Western” Mexicans. According to Reygadas, it is a semi-autobiographical fictional film about “feelings, memories, dreams, things I’ve hoped for, fears, facts of my current life.” The film alternates between realist and other registers, in a kind of cinematic autoethnography, a research and narrative method that questions the objective observer position, as well as the concept of the coherent self, and draws connections between autobiographical, cultural, social, and political “texts.”⁴ This technique indexes the distortional effects of what Johannes Fabian has called the “ethnographic present,”⁵ towards a recognition of the durational propinquities of the time after NAFTA.

In the register of a persistent “now” that deliberately projects the interplay of analepsis and prolepsis, cutting forward and back, *Post Tenebras Lux* disambiguates the time after as a cutting and diachronic sense of the precarious and uncanny present, rendering the distance between narrative and event as an ethical and political question for cinematography, thus formally blurring the boundaries between art and performative autoethnography. Reygadas transcribes the possibility of seeing and narrating the ineffable “now” by making palpable the violence of its constructions, particularly in the cinematic production of an ethnographic present that taunts the rendering of its subjects as absent and “past.” Materializing the suspensions between what has been and what will be, Reygadas’ aesthetic deters, or refrains from

prescription, precisely because the fantasia of “action” takes precedence over the official takes of the camera, and “history” itself. For Reygadas, as well as for his colleague Béla Tarr, the time after presents the task of “rendering duration [...] sensible, of having given it an autonomous existence.”⁶ The possibility of autonomy governs both Fabian’s critique of the ethnographic present and Reygadas’ treatment of affective temporalities, as each seeks to disrupt official, bureaucratic conceptions of time in favour of more rhizomatic dispensations of the real.

Opening in the rainy season (and reminiscent of Tarkovsky), the camera follows Rut, Reygadas’ real-life daughter, blonde and maybe three years old, running around a patchy and puddled soccer pitch in the kind of colourfully sensible rain boots you might see on affluent children anywhere—if not always with attendant particular details like galloping packs of dogs, lightning shattering the sky in the electrically darkening dusk, or the obvious adjacency to Mexico City. Her brother Eleazar, slightly older, is also in the film. Reygadas explains: “For the children to be there really powerfully, it had to be my children. Otherwise they would be representations of children. It’s difficult to explain, but so often when you are watching a film it’s like you’re seeing ideas and not the things themselves.”⁷ The dogs also belong to Reygadas, though audiences can hardly guess this. Here the elements—rain, thunder, lightning, people, animals, landscape—are as constructed as they are real, as made as they are found. The opening operatic sequence presents the leashed and unleashed stormy forces, the known and the unknown, the feature film and the autoethnographic documentary (a method for writing about self and other); in short, it stages both performance and the *vérité* of life itself, querying the porous boundary between art and life.

The presence of an authority holding the camera is carefully acknowledged by the panting dogs, who never look at it (or him) directly. Rut splashes after some cows mooing in the near distance, as the light slowly fades

from the sky into darkness. Everything on the screen (as well as our spectatorial senses) is entirely consumed by thunder and rain and shadow and earth and lightning and sky, the clamour of nature’s infinity conjuring a scale of immense contrast with the girl vulnerable to man, dog, and sky alike—simultaneously studied and protected by the camera, somehow both sensitive and oblivious to the storm, ostensibly safe, but promised the *post tenebras lux*. Again, the paternal presence of the camera means she is not alone, but Reygadas also watches her as a thing made to be alone: with dogs and cows and rain and lightning and puddles—in other words, in the elements. Borders between the here and there do not produce “clarity” so much as stage the breathing, rhythmic swell of seeing, being and time tied to and yet independent from objects in the camera’s field of vision. The fictional documentary filmmaker—like Fabian’s ethnographer—has made its object, both located in and removed from time. As a creature of “nature,” Rut both mimics and eludes his making: she is the signature of paternalist reproduction framed as solitude, authenticity, and whiteness.

Reygadas draws attention to the anachronistic activity of transcribing the present by using the boxy 1:33 aspect ratio, an old standard for silent films in the 1930s (in photography we usually see the 4:3 relationship, which describes the proportion between width and height). The tunnel-vision focus effect of the 1:33 aspect ratio materializes the blur of vision as a domain of not-seeing: things that could be in focus—dogs, puddles, rain, mountains, the girl—are made to be not quite what they are in the beveled warp of the camera’s image. Indeed, when Rut strays from the centre of the frame, tottering in and out of the square plane of focus, the anxiety of paternalistic access to the object of vision becomes tangible. We watch the camera select its object, a mimicry of the eye at work, looking at some things directly, and others indirectly; as things recede into a distance that is palpably manufactured by the seeing eye, Reygadas

makes audiences watch as his technology of seeing makes, distorts, and isolates its objects from their surrounding contexts. The 1:33 ratio also produces a dizzying effect, as there is a conflict between how the camera sees and how the spectator’s eye, or “I,” apprehends and constitutes its object in the continuous perspectival flow. By contrast, the omniscient digitized gaze, according to Reygadas, has become something monstrous, in that its technologies see “all” in a way no human eye can, and his decision to counter this with a more “realistic” if dissonant ratio is deliberate.

Inside the box there is sharp focus; at its edges, a warping blur. Borders between the here and there do not produce “clarity” so much as stage the breathing, rhythmic swell of seeing, being and time tied to and yet independent from objects in the camera’s field of vision. When Rut turns out not to be where the camera puts her, when she is outside the comfortable focus of its gaze, when she is distorted by its “eye,” Reygadas provokes the experience of nausea through a dissonance between the body’s sensory perception and its fallible efforts to map itself spatially. What Fabian describes as the epistemological mechanism of exclusion transfigures objects of study into things that are “outside” or prior to time, constituted by their temporal exteriority; what edges out of the camera’s focus also edges out of its spatio-temporal synchrony. The 1:33 aspect ratio stages and makes visible this relation with temporal alterity, and hence with the DF borderlands’ epistemologies after NAFTA, as the objects of the gaze push back against the “objective” time and technology of focus. The camera blurs Rut and everything else around her, dogs and nature shifting in and out of proximity, and the antagonism between representational formats takes on a performative dimension. Explains Reygadas: “Why did I want that look? Because aesthetics are in the end a reinterpretation of the world.”⁸ The now and the then of temporality deeply mark Reygadas’ interpretations of DF border spaces.

Recording the antagonisms of contemporary Mexican life, Reygadas both refutes and

reiterates the position of authorial filmmaker by making visible the production of the ethnographic present in the context of DF's everyday exurban "borderlands." Because Reygadas considers film "not an art of representation, but an art of presence,"⁹ he necessarily reckons with Fabian's fabled critique: that the ethnographic present (its museological present tense, which sets its objects up for perpetual display by "official" timekeepers), is both rhetorical vehicle and enactment, yielding strategies meant "to keep the Other outside the Time of anthropology."¹⁰ Traditionally, the ethnographic present yields a kind of transcription based on a narrative strategy of suspension, or one that suspends objects from its elite, narrative community; it is "a practice of giving accounts of others in the present tense."¹¹ In *Post Tenebras Lux*, Reygadas rejects the ethnographer's shizogenic use of time.¹²

Reygadas cuts from nature to the still of the domestic indoors, a home in which a family is



quietly sleeping; no one moves in the silence. As if to emphasize the fictional aspect of cinema, ethnography, and the documentary feature alike (and to underscore again the parable of Job), the camera pans to an ordinary looking door, and stages an exuberantly theatrical threshold. Then, in walks the devil—artifice itself, a glowing red, CGI cartoon figure, tall and thin like the Pink Panther, but crimson, bearing horns and dangling genitalia, a modern-day satyr. Deadpan, Reygadas reflects that the narrative comes not from information but from

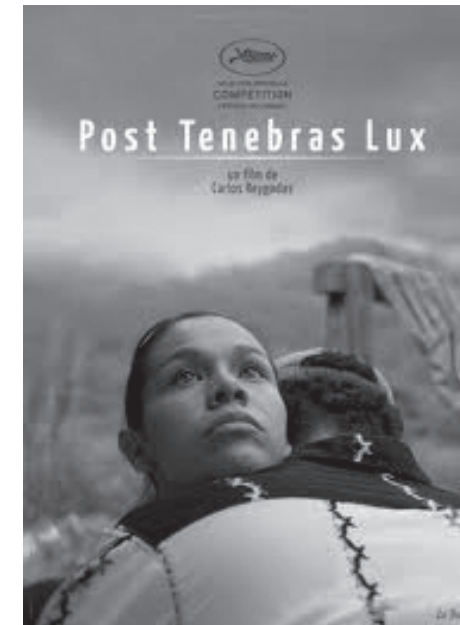
our actual perception of life. Eleazar is alert to the profound and material reality of satanic presence, in the world and at home, and quietly watches as the devil opens the door to Juan and Nathalia's bedroom, goes in, and shuts the door behind him. Neither actor nor character, the son Eleazar is alert to the cut, or break, constituting the real. As Rancière suggests, "Less than ever, then, is it a matter of opposing the real to the illusion. It is a matter of inserting a fantastic element into the heart of the real, which cuts it in two."¹³

Leaving the audience to suspect that the trouble, whatever it is that troubles the Reygadas' home, is sexual in nature (and Reygadas' critics are often misled by sexual spectacle), the camera cuts to the next morning, with the nuclear family at breakfast eating strawberries and pancakes. We are now in the genre of realist family melodrama, happy at first, and then inexorably sad, following Tolstoy's maxim. For this family, the scene shifts when Juan leaves the breakfast table to check on the dogs, with whom he congregates enthusiastically throughout the film. It is a plenitude of affection and nuzzlings between man and his best friends; they are eager for their feeding and he can deliver it. Juan's joy flips to rage, however, when he suddenly and violently starts beating one of his dogs, the one he says is his favourite, "the smartest dog." She has disobeyed, circumvented a rule, demonstrably begs for forgiveness, and cowers and whimpers as he beats her: Juan holds her down, punches her in the ribs, and slams her head against the deck (the veterinarian, Juan knows, is "suspicious" about all the trauma this dog has suffered).

Remorseful and inarticulate, addicted to his abusive behaviour, and chided by Nathalia for it, Juan takes off from the house to attend other matters of property, following El Siete, a local man in his service, through Juan's land to a rough shack in a wooded corner. El Siete explains that it is being used without his permission and invites Juan to the shack to attend the AA meetings being held there, offering rehabilitation to men testifying to

broken lives destroyed by drugs, the drug economy, and labour migrations al Norte. Young and old, the men from Morelos recount joblessness, addiction, narcoviolencia: stories of families lost, the testimony of inconsolable futures, as if to suggest that scenes of affective annihilation continually recur, in the time after. Rather than see himself as a subject of repentance and rehabilitation, Juan offers his noblesse oblige, which is both indifference and denial. But he will not admit himself as a subject of rehabilitation, post tenebras lux.

After the realist family drama, Reygadas returns to the 1:33 aspect ratio for *El Siete's* visual baroque, again indexing the filmmaker's autoethnographic act of appropriation.



Reygadas shows the grandeur of the forest, magisterial and distorted by the seeing eye, the ominous rip of a chain saw echoing in the distance. The camera slowly closes in on *El Siete* through the bevelled, striating lens, sawing down trees. Is it a desperate reach for the sale of natural resources, as *El Siete's* service work counts for too little? When one tree falls in the forest, it takes others down with it: an eerie ballet of man-made disaster,

the destructions of nature and NAFTA thus intertwined. The catastrophic falling of majestic trees is recapitulated by the loss of family, which is exactly what happens when *El Siete's* wife packs up their daughter and leaves Morelos one last time. Juan, more prosperous, appears to enjoy the privilege of maintaining his family, but the antagonisms of coloniality are inevitable. Later, *El Siete* robs Juan's home, taking a flat screen TV and an Apple computer, and accidentally shoots Juan when he returns unexpectedly in the middle of the mini-heist. Juan shouldn't have been there; he was on his way back to Mexico City and turned back; nobody could have expected it; it's nothing personal. But it is exactly personal, this conflict—the denial of coevalness, the ways their relationship to each other has changed over time. The only equivalency that stands is that of contemporaneity, an antagonism that does not see societies as passing through different developmental stages (of modernity, of neoliberal political economies after NAFTA, of narcocapitalism), but as "different societies facing each other at the same Time."¹⁴

Reygadas describes his double, Juan, as "the typical, dissatisfied, Western male,"¹⁵ in whose Mexico the racial division of labour repeats the theatre of tragedy, and then farce. Reygadas satirically records the romance of paternalistic tragedy, as Juan accepts death (from *El Siete's* gunshot) to the tune of Neil Young's "It Was A Dream," redolently played by Nathalia on the family piano. With the fantasy of Juan's death, there is no ritual of enlightenment without its corresponding backbone of coloniality. Seemingly far removed from the usual spectacular violence of maquila and narco economies, there in the lugubrious hills south of the DF In *Post Tenebras Lux*, Mexico City's border time is at once furtively and frantically sensed—in the manipulation and writing of seeing, fantasias real and unreal; in the destruction of natural resources; consumer culture; in the brutalization of animals and women, arguably interchangeable as service workers to men, whether as owners, fathers,

husbands; in a realist or surrealist drama, safe and unsafe at home.

As a postscript, the film closes with the camera's boxy tunnel vision, zooming in to a prep-school scene of English schoolboys playing rugby; it's Derbyshire, where Reygadas was schooled. The camera goes in close to the scrum and then wide to show the passes; the rhythmic sounds of boys traipsing over the green, forward and back, as their panting becomes a primal chorus, is so detailed in its running thumps and rhythms that it recalls the film's first thunderous scene. While huddling, one of the boys performs the role of the "captain," offering a pep talk to his team in a keen display of the sheer propaganda of the rational (Kantian) subject, manifest in the heightened reality of its performance: by all appearances an Anglo-Protestant English boy, the captain exclaims: "They are nothing. They are individuals. We have a team. Go team!" At that the boys rumble back to the game, barking team slogans, beholden to the unleashed logic of the game. Reygadas explains:

It's a film about Juan, who lives, who imagines, who remembers, and probably we see bits of his life. He could have been on a rugby team when he was young. But the rugby scene is also there at the end to mean that life goes on, we keep on playing and we need to play, disregarding the fact that it's raining blood in Mexico and heads are being torn off. Rugby's a good fit for the film: the physicality of it matches the violence of the land, of nature, of life, but at the same time there's love. I love what this English boy says at the end, which could be a statement against bankers: they're strong, they're terrible, but we are a team and we will not let them destroy us, so carry on, let's go. It's a rebellious film in that sense.¹⁶

Like rugby, the film swerves between moving forwards and backwards, in and out of the ethnographic present, revealing on the one hand the order of things as the provincial conceit of the international elite (reinstating

the logics of governance and the enlightenment subject as centre of the universe as it is written), and on the other, gesturing towards the possibilities of affective autonomies—not entirely circumscribed by linear writings in time, and yet eternally beholden to its conscriptions. In *Post Tenebras Lux*, it ends as it begins, at another dusk, where, as Fabian observes, "the object's present is founded in the writer's past. In that sense, facticity itself, that cornerstone of scientific thought, is autobiographic."¹⁷ For Fabian, pretense to objective method works strictly as a condition of authorial precaution; it is an administrative agreement, "if only for fear that their reports might otherwise be disqualified as poetry, fiction, or political propaganda."¹⁸ The film is not so much technically concerned with the achromatic or luminance as it is, says Reygadas, "like an expressionist painting where you try to express what you're feeling through the painting rather than depict what something looks like."¹⁹ *Post Tenebras Lux* counterposes cinematic afterimages and perception, mediating the boundaries between art and life, staging the allochronic antagonisms. But the question remains: in what tense does one write the time after?

Notes

1

Ed Vulliamy and Saptarshi Ray, "David Simon, Creator of *The Wire*, Says New US Drug Laws Help Only 'White, Middle Class Kids,'" *The Guardian*, 25 May 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/25/the-wire-creator-us-drug-laws>.

2

Jacques Rancière, Béla Tarr, *The Time After* (Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2013), 9. Rancière studies the failed political and economic landscapes of Tarr's Hungary. Reygadas teaches at Tarr's Film Factory in Sarajevo.

3

Dennis Lim, "All the Dreaminess of Reality," *The New York Times*, 26 April 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/28/movies/post-tenebras-lux-by-carlos-reygadas-at-film-forum.html>.

4

Deborah Reed-Danahay, *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social* (Explorations in Anthropology) (New York: Berg Publishers, 1997), 2. Reed-Danahay explains: "The term has a double sense—referring either to the ethnography of one's own group or to autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest. Thus, either a self-(auto-)ethnography or an autobiographical auto-ethnography can be signalled by 'autoethnography.'"

5

Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). Fabian argues that while research practices are rooted in the dynamics of intersubjectivity—contingent, and indeed performative—ethnographic writing (as it is produced and narrated in published research, and the insider talk of professionalizing salons) produces its objects of study by way of temporal distancing. Objects of study are made to be outside of scientific or scholarly time, and are defined by the principle of their exteriority to the rhetoric of pasts, presents, and futures. After Fabian, critics have struggled with the question, "in what tense does one write an ethnographic account?" (xxvii).

6

Rancière, Béla Tarr, 43.

7

Lim "All the Dreaminess of Reality."

8

Mark Olsen, "Post Tenebras Lux's Carlos Reygadas is Polarizing," *The Los Angeles Times*, 2 June 2013, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/moviesnow/la-et-mn-indie-focus-post-tenebras-lux-20130602,0,7254344.story>.

9

Ibid.

10

Fabian, *Time and the Other*, xli.

11

Ibid., 80.

12

Decades later, it is clear that criticisms of allochronic habits accrue to every arts and humanities discipline reproducing the paradoxes of narrative authorization.

13

Rancière, Béla Tarr, 54.

14

Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 155.

15

Olsen, "Post Tenebras Lux."

16

Dennis Lim, "Cannes Film Festival: Loud Boos Don't Phase Reygadas," *Arts Beat Blog*, *The New York Times*, 12 May 2012.

17

Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 89.

18

Ibid., 33.

19

Carlos Reygadas *Biography*, Film Factory, <http://filmfactory.ba/faculty/CarlosReygadas.html>.