


18 John Gibson, To Die in Mexico: Dispatches from Inside the Drug War (San Francisco: City Lights, 2011), 69.

19 See, for example, the work of the early-20th-century photographers Modotti, Horne, and Casasola, respectively discussed by Lavoie, Linfield, and Folgarait.


22 Lara Nielsen, “The Time After NAFTA: DF’s Border Time (and the Other) in Post Tenebras Lux,” Post Tenebras Lux, 28:28 (2012). To revisit the material impoverishments of fortune and flesh in Job is to consider anew the relationship between temporalities and social relations between country and city, imagining the world ‘made flesh.’

23 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 colonialism. 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 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,” 22 Billed as “a 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.” 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 colonialism. 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 of major metropolises in the UK, Spain, and Belgium.

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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 film is 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 event as an ethical and political question of the precarious and uncanny present, and disambiguates the time after and prolepsis, cutting forward and back, deliberately projects the interplay of analepsis and “past.” Materializing the suspensions of life itself, querying the porous 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 powerful, 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.” The dogs also mimic the authoritarian presence of the camera, and can hardly guess this. 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 and time tied to and yet independent from time, and what edges out of their temporal exteriority; what edges out of the blur of vision as a domain of not-seeing. The 1:33 aspect ratio stages 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 1950s (in this reading of Tarkovsky’s film Andrey Rubel’s Back, we 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 and time tied to and yet independent from time, and what edges out of their temporal exteriority; what edges out of 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 bevelled 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 want to 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 spaces. 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 digital 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 and 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’s focus is, 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 spatial coordinates. 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 periphery, and becomes something that 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.” 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
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Reygadas describes his double, Juan, as “the typical, dissatisfied, Western male,” in whose Mexico the racial division of labour repeats the theatre of tragedy, and then farce. Reygadas satirically records the romance of patriarchal tragedy, as Juan acquires a new woman and new home (from El Siete’s gunshot) to the tune of Neil Young’s “It Was A Dream,” redolently played in whose Mexico the racial division of labour repeats the theatre of tragedy, and then farce. Reygadas satirically records the romance of patriarchal tragedy, as Juan acquires a new woman and new home (from El Siete’s gunshot) to the tune of Neil Young’s “It Was A Dream,” redolently played

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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 parable of Job), the camera pans to an ordinary looking door, and stages an exuberantly

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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; it’s Derbyshire, where Reygadas was schooled. The film is not so much

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, when, 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.”

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.” The film is not so much technically concerned with the achronic 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.”

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Notes
3. Ryegadas teaches at Tarr’s Film Factory in Sarajevo.
5. 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’.”
6. 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 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?” (avan.)
7. Rancière, Bélà Tarr, 43.
8. Lim, “All the Dreaminess of Reality.”
10. Fabian, Time and the Other, xii.
11. Ibid, 80.
12. Decades later, it is clear that criticisms of allchronic habits accrue to every arts and humanities discipline reproducing the paradoxes of narrative authorization.
13. Ranciere, Béla Tarr, 54.
14. Ibid.
15. Olsen, “Post Tenebras Lux.”
17. Fabian, Time and the Other, 89.

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, when, 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.”

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