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Post-photographic Images of the Night In Mexico City's Historic Downtown

From its beginnings, photography has documented the material and sociocultural dimensions of cities. The use of the flash, filters, and other analog camera accessories allowed for greater proximity to parts of nightlife. Today, smartphones, with their cameras and web apps, make it possible for digital images to multiply in virtual space. They are making it easier and more and more common to capture our sojourns through the city.

We are witnessing the arrival of what Joan Fontcuberta called “post-photography,”¹ that is, the production of digital images with new technological communication devices that make it possible for photographs to circulate in the net’s virtual space in a matter of seconds. Today, Instagram is one of the most commonly used communications networks for the exchange of images and messages. Its users can send out photos in seconds, edit them with app “filters,” add key words, and indicate the place where the im-

age was taken. The post-photographic images of the urban night on this platform reveal the lighting, the multiple rhythms, and the social relations created there. Our research interest, beyond the aesthetic analysis of the image, focuses on underlining the visual narratives that make up the construction of the nocturnal in a historically and symbolically important space: Mexico City’s Historic Downtown.

Today, downtown Mexico City is an obligatory reference point for local nightlife. For the last two decades, nighttime activity has increased there with the opening of entertainment venues and cultural and sightseeing tours (for example, Museum Night and the Big-Red-Bus-type Turibus tours). As the work to renovate the city’s plazas and streets was underway between 2006 and 2010, a new kind of street lighting was introduced to underline the architectural characteristics of historic buildings and monuments.

To seek out the images for a “night downtown” on Instagram, we used the labels #nocheCDMX (Mexico City night) and #CD-MXdenoche (Mexico City at night); most of the places photographed are within the downtown area’s “A” perimeter. The following is a brief reflection about those images.

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City Lights

In the late nineteenth century, the downtown's main plazas, streets, and avenues were the first to have electric lighting. In the sphere of urban planning, its design focuses on the creation of "atmospheres" that aesthetically combine the lights with the architecture.² It is no surprise that the first places to be lit were government buildings and the main plazas. Thus, the Zócalo Plaza became a place for nocturnal gatherings and promenades.³

For its part, the staging of the illumination of the National Palace framed its architectural details and made it seem perceptively larger. Just like in theatrical staging, urban spaces are transformed by the lighting, which exalts their historic and symbolic capital, creating a celebratory atmosphere.

Light shows were first projected on the buildings around the Zócalo Square in December 1963. Christmastime and around Independence Day celebrations are the times when the area's main streets are dressed with special lighting. At Christmastime, for example, figures made out of lights, like stars, piñatas, poinsettias, and Christmas trees, festoon the buildings with a kind of "urban masks."⁴

Every year, the design becomes more and more spectacular. Francisco I. Madero Street, a well-known pedestrian mall boasting international brand stores, steps up its lighting at this time of year. From there, visitors can see the huge Christmas tree set up in the Zócalo Square. Added to these Christian values are the "consumer aesthetics" of the stores near the plaza, which also illuminate their facades and windows.⁵ The rituals in the display windows continue until the wee hours with the help of this lighting, showcasing products.

Walking through the city no longer has as its only objective "practicing it," as Michel de Certeau would say.⁶ The art of wan-

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dering —with knowledge of the location of shops and large stores— would be prompted by the visual stimuli of nocturnal consumption. So, we should ask ourselves how many hours we could lose ourselves looking for Christmas presents.

Within the category of images of illumination, we encounter that of "patrimonial lights," those that, as mentioned above, are placed on monuments and buildings with high symbolic-identity value. In Mexico, archaeologists, historians, and conservation specialists have criticized their excessive use in these spaces, but in most cases, the aim is to attract national and international visitors.

One of the buildings that boasts the most complex lighting is the Fine Arts Palace. The art nouveau and art deco marble building was commissioned by President Porfirio Díaz to introduce a "Frenchified" style into the city's image. It has been photographed at night from different angles and perspectives, its architecture accented and dramatized by pink and blue neon lights. In Instagram photographic compositions, the urban elements and dynamics of, for example, the Central Alameda Park and the movement of automobiles and pedestrians along Juárez Avenue serve as a frame for the palace.

Most patrimonial buildings have a lighting design that changes with the seasons or to support a social cause, such as the use of pink for the fight against breast cancer, or purple to symbolize the fight against gender violence.

One of the most noteworthy photographic compositions uses different-colored diffuse reflection framed by the urban night. The Latin American Tower, known as “the Latino,” one of our local modern architectural symbols, is the theme. In this case, the identification and reading of symbols is dual: the night appears as a series of faded lights and the silhouette of the Latin American Tower, symbol of the city, is recognizable even when blurred.

The postmodern condition, charged with meanings open to a multiplicity of interpretations, manifests itself in parallel to the images of the blurred metropolis.⁷ Different possibilities of appropriation and use by heterogeneous urban groups thus constitute the nocturnal. The postmodern night is therefore open to different meanings.

Nocturnal Rhythms and the Sociabilities of the Night

In cities, life at night marks clear borders between spaces considered dangerous, venues for nocturnal fun and leisure, places for sleeping, and nighttime economies that lengthen daytime productivity.⁸ The rhythms of the night, which Lefebvre called “polyrhythm,” are marked by the activities of those who inhabit it.⁹

At night, traffic and movement on the streets are identified by the lights of stopped or moving automobiles. Traffic in the Historic Downtown area is worse when concerts, celebrations, and political demonstrations are taking place in the Zócalo Square.

Other downtown rhythms are created in the areas of nighttime entertainment and leisure. In bars and discotheques, waiters, cooks, bartenders, and pop singers make every effort to make the night shine in all its splendor. Nightcrawlers experience a festive, relaxed atmosphere where they can forget the dynamics of daytime work. While for some the night means breaking with daytime drudgery, for others, it is the beginning of an exhausting work day behind the scenes.

Different images show that belonging to the night implies upping the singularity of your dress. Living in those hours demands certain shared social codes and rules of etiquette, since at night, “not all cats are black.” Some night owls go out dripping in sequins and spangles that complement the ambiance and lighting in entertainment venues. The night’s many possibilities are clear in the transgression of moral codes and the bohemian lifestyle of those who inhabit it.

Downtown, Garibaldi Plaza turns the night into a great street party, attended by national and local tourists alike. Mariachi musicians and others make it their place of work, while visitors are



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looking for its festive atmosphere and fun. Once again, light and sparkles are absolute essentials for setting the scene.

Final Comments

In times when visual culture has intensified, “new, citizen photographers” capture the city’s places and rhythms with their smart phones. Nightlife, with its multiple orchestrations and meanings, is continually reproduced and disseminated on platforms and social networks. In Mexico City’s Historic Center, Instagram images (post-photographs) display the different facets of the night and its aesthetics of leisure and nocturnal consumption. Rehabilitating the downtown’s public spaces included the design of lighting for its plazas, streets, and avenues. The tones of the lights invite passers-by to admire the different architectural details and compositions. As the poet Francis William Bourdillon (1852-1921) said, “The night has a thousand eyes/And the day but one.”¹⁰ Artificial lights, the eyes of the night, can be manipulated, increasing their power to expand spatially or to select and define specific places. Today, the urban night is both a conquered territory and a moment that conquers us. **MM**

Notes

- 1 J. Fontcuberta, *La furia de las imágenes: notas sobre la postfotografía* (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2016).
- 2 R. Shaw, “Beyond Night-Time Economy: Affective Atmospheres of the Urban Night,” *Geoforum* vol. 51, no. 51, January 2014, pp. 87-95.
- 3 A. López Ojeda, “La moral oscura: conflicto cultural y vida cotidiana nocturna en la Ciudad de México durante el último tercio del siglo XIX,” *Revista Culinaria* no. 1, January-June 2011, pp. 91-123.

4 Piñatas, made of clay pots or colorful papier-mâché, are an important part of the identity of Mexican celebrations. The poinsettia is the typical flower of the December festivities; in other countries it is also known as “flor de Nochebuena” (Christmas Eve flower), “flor de Pascua” (Easter flower), and “corona del Inca” (crown of the Andes).

5 Bauman states that in the aesthetics of consumption, work is stripped of its autotelic nature; that is, it stops being “an end in itself.” The symbolic efficacy shifts from the sphere of production to that of consumption. Z. Bauman, *Trabajo, consumismo y nuevos pobres* (Barcelona: Gedisa, 2000).

6 M. de Certeau, *La invención de lo cotidiano* (Guadalajara: ITESO, 2000).

7 Jean-François Lyotard, *La condición postmoderna* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2006).

8 L. Gwiazdzinski, *La Nuit, dernière frontière de la ville* (Paris: Éditions de l’Aube, 2005), p. 256.

9 H. Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis* (London/New York: Continuum, 2004).

10 Francis William Bourdillon, “The Night Has a Thousand Eyes,” in Edmund Clarence Stedman, ed., *A Victorian Anthology, 1837–1895*, <https://www.bartleby.com/246/979.html>.

Photos

- 1 @balamha, Twitter, October 10, 2017, https://www.instagram.com/p/BXmWn_gwtk/.
- 2 @figueroartt, Twitter, November 28, 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BcBdpENj006/>.
- 3 @_choluteca, Twitter, October 15, 2017, https://www.instagram.com/cdmx_oficial/.
- 4 @rafaquintana, Twitter, September, 2016, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BK1CXmIA6v0/>.
- 5 @heex_, Twitter, August 14, 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BXwuyLvAwJU/>.
- 6 @crateselcino, Twitter, Abril 20, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BhxrXB0IzpD/>.
- 7 @gabyrocha6, Twitter, November 15, 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BbgQZ7vAyc8/>.
- 8 @mskspirit, Twitter, October 10, 2017, https://www.instagram.com/p/BaDgv0LA_Oj/.
- 9 @jmtapanecatel, Twitter, May 18, 2017, https://www.instagram.com/p/BFj_DrWntMZ/.
- 10 @jasnieoswiecona, Twitter, November 18, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B9NUDoipQXL/>.