



Eugenio Pastoral / Unsplash

Juan Carlos Barrón Pastor*

The Nocturnal under Lockdown

Sun,
You don't understand what's happening here.
This is the night, and to the night
Belongs the soul of love.

Kumbala
Maldita Vecindad

When the editors of this magazine invited me to contribute to an issue about the night, I found it unsettling to know that, after so many poems, so many novels, so many celebrities, and so many studies, I decided to share something that starts off with the danzon *Kumbala*. My hope is that this article will contribute not only to remembering certain nocturnal fragments that 2020 has left us, but also to rethinking the imaginary of the night as something dark and sinister to also recognize its luminous, liberating side. That is, the night can shed light on what we are seeking so we can get through the day, which is, paradoxically, what harbors the bleak, routine part of our lives.

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For many, the night is a space of rebellion, since it is the time when they get a breather from the social mandate of producing something. This is even more the case now, when our work responsibilities are symbiotically mixed on our telephones and other devices that also include our personal lives and our —very necessary— leisure time.

Of course, among the inhabitants of the night are also those who live from it and whose every day begins when that of others is ending; and it is thanks to them that night-dwellers have somewhere to go. However, the dominant discourses are the ones that tell us that nighttime is for resting; that it is for our own good and health that we should get seven to eight hours sleep, preferably at night. Sleeping is just as important as exercising and eating fruits and vegetables, but so are recreation and

nocturnal activity. The night has also been taken over by hoodlums, nocturnal parasites, those who live on the dark side of the state, which is, supposedly, the body that has a monopoly on violence. We can only hope that someday we can have nocturnal activity without them.

For many, nighttime is the place where the last remnant of their freedom lies. It is the space and time where our internal home calms and we can reencounter ourselves, our memories, our dreams, and our nightmares for a moment. It is also the place for love, for leisure, and for doing whatever you want. At night we can be once again. Dream, make love, listen to music, dance, read, talk to our ghosts, sext, watch movies, or binge-watch a series. The night is ours.

Before the pandemic, night owls used to go out on the weekends, and sometimes even on weekdays; they would go somewhere that music was playing that fit their mood. That would be a night that would be full of half-lights and glows, until we returned to our miserable routine the next day, possibly with a hangover, sometimes fair and sometimes not.

In the long night of the pandemic, some night owls created new ways of meeting up and at the same time respecting the physical distancing measures that we were appropriately subjected to. One peculiar thing that had already existed in recent years, but during these months grew notably, are concerts, parties, and get-togethers in cyberspace (see box).

So, electronic platforms were not only useful for giving classes or holding work meetings, but also so artists, mainly musicians, could create cyber-venues to set pleasures free. At times, they seemed to try to emulate Dionysian celebrations in a non-face-to-face version, and, in some cases, as a transnational social interaction in real time.

This year has seen an unprecedented boom in nocturnal activities in these cyber-venues: remotely broadcast concerts, raves at home, meetings of friends and relatives,

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and even clandestine meetings, and, given the open social and media disapproval, authentic Bacchanalia have been organized, as well as the so-called COVID parties.

Artists connected with their followers through remotely broadcast concerts on digital networks with previously unknown versions that went from live performances from their living rooms to free access to rare materials or previously broadcast concerts. The French artist Jean Michel Jarré went a step further with regard to interconnectivity between face-to-face and remote spaces when he and his avatar gave the June 21, 2020 *Alone Together* concert, using VROOM immersive technology.¹ The electronic music was performed live and broadcast over almost the entire world on Internet and digital network platforms, with 2D and 3D surround sound experiences; and it even included a silent performance on a giant screen that the Parisian audience could watch in person, but listening to the music on earphones connected to their cell phones or tablets.

At the raves from home, some artists created private events on platforms like Discord. At those events, a DJ usually asked participants to turn on their cameras and mute their microphones. That way, the DJ could select the images of what was going on in each space the participants were connecting from, allowing them to get the feeling of a crowd, raucousness, exhibitionism, and voyeurism. The DJ could be anywhere in the world, as could all the participants. The night could even break down the time zones.

Cyberspace exists in the convergence of the media system, of telecommunications and energy, and can be understood as a territorial dimension made up of cyberspatial social locales in the process of emerging and being built. Cyberspatial locales co-produce based on social practices, symbols, and devices that originate behaviors, negotiations, disputes, and conflicts involving the aggressive capture and production of spaces and symbols that certain of the system's actors and devices create in accordance with their own interests. In these cyberspatial locales, multiple human structures unfold, which we call social interactions, and which are my object of study when they are transnational in the region of North America.

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The key was to connect with the experience and become part of the event to the beat and volume of the music, perhaps aided by alcohol or drugs. After a few hours, participants would experience ecstatic dancing, catharsis, and euphoria, and they would occasionally even strip naked, not only in the intimacy of their room, but, above all, in the sheltered outburst of the paradoxical sensation of being in a crowd, anonymous, and alone in their rooms.

Less spectacular, but perhaps more widespread, get-togethers of friends and relatives largely moved to cyberspace during the months of lockdown. A little later, but still in time, given the success of platforms like Zoom or Meet, WhatsApp and Messenger improved their group video-calls of up to four people in the former case and even up to 100 in the latter. This offered a very different usage from tools like Facebook Live, that already existed, but that offered more one-way broadcasting and more limited interaction. In contrast with the dynamic of broadcasting an event, group video-calls make it possible to reproduce the sensation of meeting with relatives and friends to talk about everyday things or even have birthday parties, organize remote karaoke performances, watch a sporting event together, or play videogames in the company of other players and not just as avatars at a console or computer.

Because they violate the norms of social distancing and in some cases even the law, clandestine in-person parties are more stigmatized. Some, such as COVID parties, had the express purpose of transmitting the disease; others, not as much. But in all cases, these events were held in open defiance of the ban on unnecessary, recreational gatherings. Mexico City witnessed parties with the sound turned up so high that the neighbors could dance on their own rooftops without violating social distancing norms. On other occasions, instead of dancing, the neighbors called the police to complain about the noise. Other times, musicians were hired to play in the street or in other open spaces. And sometimes people even gathered in small

groups on terraces, in apartments, homes, or in places of business closed to the public but open to distinguished clients. It was common to hear about twenty-somethings who met, in some cases, each with his/her headphones connected to listen to the same music, chatting on their phones despite being in the same place, some wearing masks and others not; sometimes arm-in-arm, sometimes distancing, as though confused, without knowing if they should guiltily follow their inclinations or stick to the new social norms that had already been internalized.

Nocturnal behavior also became laxer and the scheduled times more spread out. On the one hand, nocturnal activities suddenly cropped up during the day and staying up late became more frequent. So many excuses to prolong the feeling of freedom! Some reading, others playing, and still others watching series . . .

Platforms like TikTok clearly showed many people's boredom, stunning those who had more work than before. On the other hand, anxiety and violence in the home, above all directed at women, also grew as a response to the lack of jobs, ratcheting up of addictions, the stress of lockdown, and possibly a poverty of spirit that only the arts and the humanities may be able to nourish for its transformation and flowering. Throughout this long night, the humanities and the arts, precisely, showed us once more that they are the most indispensable human activities, that a nocturnal environment, at any time of day, can feed their luminosity, and that their absence increases the danger and misgivings about living together.

All darkness is followed by the dawn. Danzon gives way to jazz, and, like in Haruki Murakami's novel *After Dark*, the Curtis Fuller Quintet performs *Five Spot after Dark*,² as we wait for the sun to come up. We are together in solitude at those extended nocturnal hours. Fears, anxieties, uncertainties, and melancholy pile on top of one another. So much bewilderment, so much injustice! But wakefulness and proximity can still bring us together and help us heal the wounds of loneliness, closing the abysses that this crisis has accentuated. It is the dawn of a new night, in which confinement turns into another opportunity to take flight, allowing us to experience the break of day. ■■■

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Notes

¹ <https://jeanmicheljarre.com/alonetogether>.

² *Five Spot after Dark*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_BIHRPXPx-4.