

A blue to uproot skyscrapers

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In response to *É NOITE NA AMÉRICA / IT IS NIGHT IN AMERICA*, Ana Vaz (2022, colour/black white, 5.1 sound, 16mm transferred to HD, 66')

When they ask me how many movements the Creature can make, I respond 'I don't know anything about that, you don't know anything about that, but it knows...'¹

A pan over concrete expanse. The camera like some lost thing has gained height to try to locate itself in a sprawl of towering, windowed cliffs. In the tremble and the faltering turn of the lens that looks out across this endless city there is the unmistakable expression of disbelief.

This vastness, the scale of destruction and utter transformation literally staggers - trips up the camera's gaze - as it captures all of this space that's been stolen, torn up, concreted and hardened.

The city is unstable, and it is blue.

Shot on expiring 16mm film, using a day-for-night technique of long-exposure that estranges the daylight, and recorded only at dusk and dawn or in synthetic pools of light-through-darkness - in these liminal light states with hues that cannot hold but waver, on the cusp of uncontrollable flux - the film is washed in a rich blue. Blue is the color of distance, hills paling to blue as they recede. There's the blueness of loss. Or blue vulnerability, like the subterranean current of the vein-blue. On the degrading film stock, in troubled twilight tones, Vaz makes unstable images and summons an almost-reality, where birds and animals sing in the dead of night and small round lights are echoing.

Brasilia is a planned city, built at rapid speed where fifty years' construction was achieved in five, to replace Rio de Janeiro as a more centrally located capital. Through a series of black and white photographs of the zoo under construction, and of animals being removed from the region, Vaz briefly nods to the catastrophic ecological upheaval of this period. When Brasilia sprung out of nowhere from the rainforest as a cataclysmic growth of concrete, new material and terrain shocked the landscape like the crash of tectonic plates, or like the arrival of a vast alien craft, with alien matter spilling out, and breeding. The vet tells us that animals are made sick by their proximity to, or else their engulfment in, this urban sprawl. The day-for-night blue tinge of the film recalls old Western movies which leaned heavily on

the technique, evokes cowboys riding across a stolen vista, and calls the project of the city what it is: a colonisation.

Footage from a car plays out slowly. No people, not yet, no human bodies or faces just their armature and fortresses, concrete and machines. Or else just darkness obscuring everything; a deep blue-black shot through with holes of red and green and sombre tones that reverberate against the fizz-hum of synthetic light and animal calls.

For the longest time there is no human speech. When we do hear it, it is in snatches on a car radio or recorded phone calls to the Military Police Emergency Unit, as one animal after another has trespassed too closely into human orbit and now must be removed, either to the zoo or to the vet. The animals who are lost, displaced and rounded up are suffering an incessant violence, slow and largely unseen, that we walk alongside every day in order to live how we do in our metropolises. We may be quick to condemn the orchestrators of this fast-colonising city, but slower to judge the callers to the authorities, who wish for swift removal of non-human lives. Where do the limits of our hospitality lie? We would not want to live among snakes either. Like this we learn to accept so much trauma and step daily over the bodies of animals. The horror in Vaz's film is the discord of this detachment, this alienated flora and flesh.

Vaz's film-making invites empathy with other life forms. The camera is reaching for immanence - not dispassionate, perhaps cautious - toward the feeling of crossing over, becoming-animal. For the most part *It is Night in America* speaks only the languages that all animals understand: only the noises of the day or night unfolding; of peace or threat; of metal moving on tarmac; or of

the rain. Up close there's the language of short breaths, bellies that rise and fall, small spasm in the muscle of a leg and the poetry of slinking shoulders, details that pull us close to the creatures and make us feel our creature-ness too.

The camera lets light leak in through an aperture that dilates. Animals treading the city like ghosts seep onto 16mm film in velvet-rough grain and rich colour. The tooth of it, the realness of the medium, makes its status as image tangible. A 16mm camera is heavy to hold and to move with and in this way it records itself becoming a part of the filmer's body, whose movements alter to accommodate it. We the viewer see this movement written and are reminded of the other being who looks, and films, as though we are seeing through those other eyes. In cinema, we are supposed to ignore the camera and the distance it creates from the image but here we do not.

The animals don't ignore the aperture-eye of the camera either; for them it is not absent and they do not know of any cinematic convention to ignore it, and so they return its gaze. The power and confrontation of looking at another being looking at you opens a window. With an owl's steady stare, that the camera fixes upon and holds, we're reminded that not everything can be laid open for us. There's a chill to the lock of eyes meeting yours from somewhere remote, like looking through a telescope to another planet and seeing the lens of a telescope looking right back. A shudder. A thrill. The owl's dark pupil dilates and shrinks, a hole, bottomless. What knowledge, what thought is there, what world is forming? Feathers separate so that a silhouette enlarges as hairs stand aloft from goose-bumped skin. We can try to read the other's expression but so much

of speech in all its forms evaporates before it is understood: and other beings retain their opacity. There is strong allure and magic to this dark interior space of not-knowing, that imagination strains into but cannot enter. This darkness is uncomfortable and fascinating. *I want the feeling of a fur skin that bristles as I smell a subtle change in the wind / I want the mystery of distinct, incomprehensible, myriad modes of experience to stay intact. I want to know / I want to remain in the dark. I want closeness / I marvel at distance.* Vaz knows the anxiety of holding two feelings at once. And that there is danger in a curiosity that wants nothing left in shadows.

The opening shot of the film - the pan sweeping the city's skyline - haunts the close-held attention to the animal bodies, highlighting their smallness and vulnerability within a vast human territory. Francis Alys said that the creation of modern cities has necessitated the transformation of animals into 'leftovers of our society'.² We feel this - the animals are soft and small against hard metal and concrete, pushed to the margins - but the close-cropped shots of their bodies make them huge too, with feathers and paws stretching across a cinema screen, their forms folding outward like atlases of interlocking parts.

It is Night in America begins and ends with enormity. Blue is the torrent that Vaz leaves us with: sections of falling water the size of houses. Watching the waterfall, patterns of descending water seem to repeat, their shapes resounding in sublime, plummeting incessance. Where is this weight of water moving to, with mass on a scale that is hard to comprehend? This enormity is blue motion, blue force, downwards blue. A blue to uproot skyscrapers.

¹ Lygia Clark, 'Bichos' [Creatures], from Clark's journal (Rio de Janeiro, 1960), translated by Dane Larsen, 2013.

² Francis Alys, quoted by Cuauhtémoc Medina, 'Fable Power', in *Francis Alys* (London, 2007), 61.

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