



nocturnal Babylon

*Application for Torino Film Lab
by Noorafshan Mirza & Brad Butler*

Writer & Director Intention

In 1894 Martial Bourdin — a French anarchist, wandered towards the Royal Observatory with a bag containing a **metal case full of explosives**. He primed it with a bottle of sulfuric acid. But then, as he stood facing the observatory, it exploded in his hands. Bourdin failed in his attack on the observatory which just 10 years earlier had been established as the **symbolic centre of the British Empire**.

The planting of the seed for *nocturnal Babylon* began several years ago. We wanted to imagine a **decolonial city**, one that we wanted to live in ourselves. But at first, we struggled to find the words. So, we made work about that struggle (*Hold your ground* 2011). We analysed the deep **entrenched forms of state power** (*Deep State*, 2013) and the narratives that held it up (*The Unreliable Narrator* 2016). We co-created a theatre company with the Migrant's Resource Centre to tell **stories otherwise unseen and unheard** (*Implicated Theatre* 2010-2016). We even created a fictional museum to communicate **our desire to withdraw from systems** we knew to be oppressive, racist and patriarchal (*The Museum of non Participation*, 2009-2016) The nature of the world we wanted to build only revealed itself to us after we made *the Scar* (2019) The film called for us to imagine a feminist revolution. As we went to write it (like Bourdin) we found that the patterns we wanted to undo felt as deep as time itself.

The destruction of clocks seems outlandish now as so many of our perceptions of self and world are mediated by time. But it has a history. Co-ordinated time is shaped over centuries by science, power, religion and colonialism. **Time is deeply politically charged**, it benefits some, marginalizes others and blinds us from a true understanding. The clock does not measure time - it produces it.

At the heart of *nocturnal Babylon* is a **revolutionary world, led by women, where all gender, race and sexual orientation are equal**. It is the world we have always dreamt of. But it lives in simultaneous space with a dayCity that is a layered corporate police state, a **grotesque mirror to the direction of our current democracies**. And between the two is a clock that holds the divide. Until one night ... **someone blows it up**.

We feel our life work as directors has been leading to this point. To create a feminist revolutionary film where sheroes and heroes push back against misogynoir. **Our dream is to share that story**.



She is a friend of my mind.
She gather me, man.
The pieces I am, she gather
them and give them back
to me in all the right order.
It's good, you know, when
you got a woman who is a
friend of your mind.

-Toni Morrison, *Beloved*



Synopsis


Throughout cinema the night has been a place for vampires, slasher movies, psychotic killers and violent criminals. **But what if we started telling the opposite story?** What if there were a nightCity which was an anti-racist utopia? Where racial justice, gender equality and indigenous knowledge were valued and celebrated? **Where women were the leading agents of this revolution?** And what if this nightCity lived alongside its antagonist? A dayCity that is a place of borders and skyscrapers, of police and passports. A dayCity run by corporations that thrives on capital, prisons, promotions and surveillance. **A dayCity where even your dreams are recorded.**

This is the world that we enter with a young girl called Priya who starts our film unable to even recall her own name. **Priya is in 'a drift'**. A way of recovering her own memory by drifting through other people's memories of her. She is at first helped in this by a wise nocturnal elder called **Rosalie**, a woman who carries the memories of her people in her body. But as Priya slowly starts to recall who she is, so her universe starts to expand. She finds **she is being followed by Dreamcatchers** that traffic young powerful dreamers for re-conditioning. She learns about **Synchronisers** who believe that whoever controls time controls the future. And she learns about **the painful legacy of her own family** who became wealthy through the colonial plantation system that enslaved thousands of people.

But Priya also learns that her memory was taken from her for a reason. Priya is a dreamer, and though all dreamers are different, her ability is unique. Because **whatever Priya dreams – happens**. And when Priya dreams the end of the countdown clocks that divide the night and day, neither city can be the same again. Instead, thrust together, **the night and day must either prepare for battle, or find peace by reckoning with how the city came to be divided in the first place.**

Why now?

Ours is a world of rising far-right nationalism, white supremacy, racial tension and impending ecological catastrophe. *nocturnal Babylon* stands in opposition to this structural violence and colonial amnesia. It takes contemporary social movements such as *#MeToo*, *Black Lives Matter* and *Extinction Rebellion* and gives them a space in the night hours to live by their own ethics. The resulting NightCity - *nocturnal Babylon* is a society where feminine and indigenous forms of knowledge have agency and value. It is a city where powerful BAME heroes and sheroes push back against the DayCity's misogynoir. In so doing *nocturnal Babylon* follows in the path of ground-breaking debut films such as *La Haine*, *Welcome II the Terrordome* and *Hunger* that are powerful forms of social critique.



STAY
HOME

In the early 21st Century, the AI system collapsed without warning. London fell into a period of chaos known as 'The Panics' until a group of 23 rival corporations (Corps) stepped in to maintain order.

But not everyone was willing to accept the Corp regime

Led by diviners or seers known as dreamers, revolutionaries took up the curfew hours and declared their independence. The daysiders called it 'The nightCity'

*The nightCity dreamers called it **nocturnal Babylon***

PRIYA (14 years old) is unable to recall her name. Disoriented she surveys her surroundings. A corporate office, a clock counting down, the branding: *Senscorp*. Lost, she clings to a nocturnal elder ROSALIE, who reassures Priya that this is 'a drift'. A process of drifting (re-living) other people's memories to re-find her own.

Priya is drifting JESSICA, a dream analyst who reports on illegal dayside dreamers. Jessica is in Senscorp with her colleague ELLIS preparing to visit the nightCity. For Jessica this means facing her fears. Daysiders are told to not go out at night and clocks are on every street counting down the daylight hours.

In the nightCity Ellis leads Jessica through the culture shock. It starts with Jessica releasing her prejudice. Things work differently at night, and she must come to terms with a series of revelations. The nocturnals have established a gender equal society. They have a different value system. They have new words for concepts and different hopes and dreams. They are also a city in a permanent emergency. The dayCity are a colonising culture which includes stealing nocturnal children. This is the burden that still haunts Ellis, the disappearance of her older sister when she was just a child



The day after her night visit Jessica meets Priya for the first time. Priya is scared. She cannot recall who she is, and strange things have been happening. Priya asks Jessica to dream test her that night. Jessica finds it hard to refuse, Priya reminds her of her own daughter who died just a few years before.

Over the next hours Priya becomes certain she is being followed. She drifts who is hunting her and discovers it is a ruthless female dreamcatcher working for scientific zealots called SYNCHRONISERS. They are led by the SENATOR whose creed is 'whoever controls time controls the future'. Priya also learns why she is being hunted. She has a unique gift. Whatever Priya dreams - happens.

That night as Jessica tests her, Priya dreams of the AI, clocks going backwards, and a name: Bisa.

The next morning Jessica decides to visit Priya's family. Priya imagines it as a chance to reunite with her parents but is intercepted by the dreamcatcher. The dreamcatcher warns her that her parents are imposters. The dreamcatcher offers to take Priya to her real family. Lacking options and needing answers of her own, Jessica heads to talk to Ellis in nocturnal Babylon.

When Ellis hears the name 'Bisa' she barely hides her shock. For Ellis dreamcatchers are very real. She realises Priya is in danger and resolves to try to save her. She enlists her sister AVA to raid an old AI map still working at China Pacific Corp. They use their dream abilities to enter. Ava can desynchronise sound from events and Ellis can put a thought in your mind. Together they discover Priya's location. But they are too late to stop her dream taking hold. Back on the street they find daysiders blankly looking up at dead countdown clocks. The city population is in shock. Synchronisers hand out clocks counting 'up' not down. The era of the countdowns is over. They turn to Rosalie for help.



Rosalie still recalls the distant era when her people won their freedom from the AI. Rosalie is 'an original', a healer with long life who carries with her the memories of her people. She brings this wisdom to the nocturnal sisters and together they link the end of the clocks to Priya's dream. The dayside corporations are blaming events on the nocturnals and war will soon be declared. The women agree. Rosalie will confront the dreamcatcher while Ava and Jessica try to rescue Priya. Meanwhile Ellis has her own ideas.

When the dreamcatcher and Rosalie confront one another at the memory centre, Rosalie distracts the dreamcatcher with a first-hand account of how the city came to be divided in the first place. In so doing Rosalie discovers how the synchronisers killed the clocks. Then the arrival of Ellis tips the situation over the edge. Ellis recognises the dreamcatcher as her long-lost sister 'Bisa' and tries to approach her. Panicked the dreamcatcher attacks and seems to kill Ellis, only for Rosalie to heal her.

After the events the cost for all sides are counted. The Corporations have declared war on the nightCity but Rosalie is launching a 'reclaim the day' movement. Jessica is nursing Priya whose memory has been wiped by the synchronisers as from the film start. Ava is stepping into the role of the leader of the new nocturnal era.

Bisa looks different out of her synchroniser clothes and with a bandage on her neck from where she has removed her tracker. She has a photograph she retrieved from Ellis that shows the family she could not recall but has always wanted.

Then Ellis steps out of the shadows.



A woman with a large afro hairstyle is shown in profile, looking out a window at a city skyline at night. The scene is dimly lit, with a warm glow from the window and a blueish-purple light from the city lights. The woman is wearing a patterned top. The background shows a cityscape with buildings and lights.

The emotional arc

nocturnal Babylon is about family, love and belonging

Priya's yearning for **the truth about her family** leads to her emotional bond with Jessica who is still haunted **by the loss of her own daughter**. Ellis's lifelong search for her older sister is an emotional turning point for both her and the dreamcatcher when they are shocked **to discover they are sisters**. While Rosalie's protection of her people has to be reinvented when Priya dreams the **end of the two-city solution** that nocturnals had made their home. In this world new heroes are found as Ava steps up to become **a young leader** of the nocturnals, and **friends are lost** as both Travis and Leonie suffer at the hand of the dayside corporations. No character is left unmoved, and the world created around them is there to elevate each character.

Inspiration

nocturnal Babylon is inspired by contemporary social movements and ground-breaking feminist science fiction writers such as *Ursula Le Guin* and *Octavia Butler*. Its 2-city system takes inspiration from works such as *The Dispossessed*, *The City & the City* and *Counterpart*, but the focus here is on daily oppressions and divisions. Most significantly *nocturnal Babylon* recognises that throughout cinema and western thought, the night has been portrayed as a place of fear. From vampires, to slasher movies to psychotic killers to violent criminals. **This film reverses this perception of blackness and black bodies** making the night a space of safety and possibility. In so doing it privileges time travel, alternate realities, parallel universes, multiverses and alternative histories which are all hallmarks of Native storytelling tradition. As Lakota activist Nick Estes says: **“If there is something you can learn from Indigenous people, it’s what it’s like to live in a post-apocalyptic society”**.

Women
are the
agents
of the
Revolution



The day and night are held in place by a clock counting down dayhours.

06:49:27

06:49:27





Market profile and Audience appeal

nocturnal Babylon is an Indy work with mass appeal. It is for people involved with *Occupy*, *the Umbrella Revolution*, *Intersectional feminism* or *Climate change* or fans of works that imaginatively depict social and political conditions like *Get out*. It's use of alternate realities, multiverses, cosplay and fluid body self-expression will appeal to conscious gamers imagining other societies. For everyone who has been touched by the Covid 19 pandemic the themes of zoning time and space will feel eerily familiar. And for fans of *Memento*, the 'drift' in *nocturnal Babylon* will be a new take on films that are half dreams half reality. Ultimately though *nocturnal Babylon* is for those that desire self-determination, counter narratives and **the freedom to dream.**



Writer & Directors

Brad Butler and **Noorafshan Mirza** are award-winning artists who has been making Films together for 23 years.

They have been nominated for the Jarman Award, The Artes Mundi Award, and winners of Artist Film International and the Paul Hamlyn Award. Their work has been commissioned by Artangel, The Hayward gallery, The Sydney Biennale, Film London, Film and Video Umbrella, The Serpentine Gallery and The Walker Arts Centre.

UK Producer **Zadoc Nava Gholam Films**

Zadoc Nava produced GHOLAM, the critically acclaimed, debut feature by British-Iranian artist Mitra Tabrizian, starring Shahab Hosseini (winner of Best Actor award at Cannes for Asghar Farhadi's Oscar winning *The Salesman*, 2016). Zadoc is currently developing Tabrizian's new feature film project, *THE FAR MOUNTAINS*, with Rinkel Film (Holland) and Cité Films (France) and the BFI.

Zadoc was included on Film London's LODESTAR inaugural list of 25 of the London's most promising filmmakers and creative talents (2019) and longlisted for BIFA Discovery Award 2018.

Set up in 2016 by producer/director team Zadoc Nava and Mitra Tabrizian, **Gholam Films** is a London based production company committed to producing ground breaking cinema for an international audience.

www.gholamfilm.com

Mentoring

nocturnal Babylon is being mentored by **Mikkel Juel Iversen** and **Jie-Ming Chung** from Terra Media

Mikkel is a media and social impact entrepreneur. He is co-founder of TerraMedia and founder of non-profit Under One Sky. His 17 year in the entertainment industry includes being international insights director at Universal Studios and several consulting roles with international media companies. He has been involved in the distribution of 100s of films/TV series internationally from blockbusters to indies.

Jie-Ming is an entrepreneur and advisor in the media and social impact space. He is co-founder of Terra Media and a board member of Pan Asian Collective. In his 19 years in media he worked as International Controller, Finance Director and management consultant for leading film/TV Studios and independent institutions.



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