

a gift from somewhere, 2021

Golden Blue Time, or The Promise of Twilight

Billie McTernan

It's been a long day, lights in homes and on the street flicker on to meet the fading light of the sun. Drivers switch on their headlights as shades of blues and oranges meet the last of the white-grey clouds.

There are some parts of the day that just feel...ethereal.

Like when hues of pink and purple crisscross the morning and evening skies. And at the height of the day, when the sun's glowing at its full beam, making you squint and smile at the same time. And also deep in the night, when the moon lights your path and your prayers come to the fore.

And there is twilight. A time of transition between dawn and sunrise, sunset and dusk. The passage in time which is neither day or night.

Maybe today you've spent much time on buses or trains, or in your car or taxi sitting in traffic. Or maybe you've been at your desk in front of your computer, or in the market, or in bed or on the sofa. And the sun setting and the stars rising remind you that you are entering another phase of the day. A time of day when your other self steps into itself. A time where shadows stretch into the walls and pavement and lampposts around them.

Ok so I'm going to get a bit technical here so bare with me.

Scientifically speaking, there are three parts to the in-between-ness of twilight, namely, civil twilight, nautical twilight and astronomical twilight; each of which occur when the geometric centre of the sun is at specific angles below the horizon.

In the morning, astronomical twilight comes first with the onset of dawn. This is when the centre of the sun is 18 degrees below the horizon, the lowest point of twilight. Then after astronomical is nautical twilight which occurs as the first light appears at 12 degrees below the horizon. Then lastly civil twilight, which ends with sunrise, 6 degrees below the horizon.

Then as the day comes to an end the twilights appear in reverse. With civil twilight, which at this time comes just after sunset and ends as dusk begins. Nautical is next, and then astronomical, bringing in the night.

night shadows

There's something on the other side of the concrete wall, behind the barbed wire that contains the compound I live in.

At night it waves gently in the wind.

It appears, from where I stand, inside my house, peaking through the louvers, to be a flag erected next to the barbed wire. An act of protest, perhaps...A sign of lands or entire

planets, claimed or reclaimed, by people or beings who were claimed or reclaimed. Battles lost and won, and lost and won and lost and, sighs and smiles, and laughter and cries. And...

In the morning, I see the broad leaf of a plantain plant. Waving gently in the wind.

I remember being introduced to Junichiro Tanizaki's essay, 'In Praise of Shadows' by a co-curator of a group exhibition that was held in an old railway depot in Kumasi, Ghana. He mentioned the essay as we stood in the darkened warehouse among all these works by a number of artists. The depot had been near-abandoned by its original occupants, the Ghana Railway Company, and was generally in dis-repair, no longer the space to fix machinery and vehicles. But new occupants had come to fill the space, families, and for that period of time, artists.

The beauty in non-shiny things, as Tanizaki describes, includes Japanese paper, unpolished copper crockery and muted Chinese jade crystals. He refers to objects that absorb light rather than reflect it. Like at the point in the morning or evening when there's enough natural light to see, but not enough to illuminate. He goes on to write:

"A light room would no doubt have been more convenient for us, too, than a dark room. The quality that we call beauty, however, must always grow from the realities of life, and our ancestors, forced to live in dark rooms, presently came to discover beauty in shadows, ultimately to guide shadows towards beauty's ends."

That part, shadows towards beauty's ends...

And later he writes:

"we find beauty not in the thing itself but in the patterns of shadows, the light and the darkness, that one thing against another creates."

The curator said that he thought of Tanizaki's essay when standing in that old depot. And you can see why. It's a structure that could be described as a shadow of its former self but has transformed into something else for a whole range of people. There's the beauty in the both the shadows and in the patterns of shadows. The hazy space of possibility.

Many filmmakers and photographers find it important to consider the various stages of twilight I just mentioned, for their work. Which isn't much of surprise as the literal meaning of the word photography is 'writing with light'. So naturally photographers would question "what kind of light can I write with?"

So, in our twilights there are the blue hour and the golden hour. The golden is that short window of time just before the sun goes to rest, and also just after it wakes. While the blue hour, similarly shortly, occurs just after the sun rests and just before it wakes. Rarely do they last an hour. Weather changes, seasonal patterns and a place's proximity to the equator or North and South poles are just some of the factors that affect how long this shift lasts.

As the names suggest, between the golden hour and the blue hour, the sky transforms completely, and by extension a photograph's mood can change completely.

But what if you could bring this contrast, or a touch of the ethereal, into a film or photography work without the natural twilights?

The photographer Eric Gyamfi has a tendency towards the colour blue. It appears in much of his work.

I'm looking at an image from his series 'A Certain Bed'. So you can see for yourself you can pause for a second, and search:

"Untitled" from the series A Certain Bed, 2017. FOAM Talent 2018.

I'll also leave a [link](#) to it somewhere.

The image is cut in half. In its entirety, we see a man sitting on a chair, looking in the direction of the camera. There's a window behind him and the daylight pushes its way through so it's difficult to make out details of his face.

The image suggests that the camera is being held by someone whose legs can be seen from the bottom of the frame, lying on a bed. The right-hand side is printed on white or whitish paper. While the left-hand side is printed on blue paper. The legs of the person on the bed straddle each side. The left leg in the blue and the right leg in the other.

Like the contrast between the golden and blue hours, between the two images, if I can call them that, we get a different mood across what was once one image, and not just because they've been cut from each other. On the black and white side, I can see a shelf with some items on it. Beneath the shelf there's something that looks like a stand with a box on top of it. It feels like a familiar bedroom scene. But the image on the blue side, makes me curious. Granted it could be because there is someone looking towards me, and so I'm looking back. But, there's something about that blue that pulls you in...

Underneath the image is a note written by Gyamfi:

"It's the last day of January, and the last page of *Giovanni's Room*, in Fiifi's room."

Now I really want to see the expression on the man's face. But the blue paper makes it more difficult. And so we're left to guess, or better yet imagine what his face might look like. What's he thinking? What's he feeling? And who or what is he looking at?

In another image in the series (I'm not sure if this one's on the internet) there's a crowd of people gathered in some open space. Though heads are, to some extent outlined, we can't really distinguish each person's body from the mass of others around them. There are exceptions, I can point to some arms and legs, and two or three people sitting on...something. The crowd, in effect, appears as one body of shadow, a shadow body. The sky is dark and lampposts are lit.

Like the last image I described, this is also printed on blue paper. The white light from the lampposts isn't really white. And it also isn't really blue. Like a grey-blue.

Over the years I've seen and experienced this series in a few different presentations. On a bedroom wall in Accra, on a hallway wall in Accra, in a book, on a large worktable in a London art gallery, and on the walls of an exhibition room in a museum in Amsterdam. And still I'm always held by the blue.

Maybe because the eye is used to black and white, greyscale. It might not just be that what the photograph depicts is interesting. It could be a combination of what's in the image and what the image is on, that makes it extra compelling. Again, like the beauty in the shadows and patterns of shadows that Tanizaki described.

It's 6pm in Accra and I'm walking from Alliance Française to 37 to catch a ride home. The sun is setting and the bats have risen. It's mystical. Hundreds maybe thousands of them call and fly, synchronised, heading to...I'm still not sure where to, but they crowd the sky and I realise that I'm now looking up, not down at the ground, and between the bats I'm seeing the moon and stars appear and the sun disappear. The sky is warm.

When the day moves into night, or likewise night moves into day, our bodies move with it. Our ears become more perceptive to the sounds around us. A truck in the distance ploughing some road. Birds calling out to each other from some place. A cricket. A dog. An owl.

For many of us we begin to unwind at this time, we lower our masks as our day performance comes to an end. We might begin to look inward. Or we might swap our day performance with our night one, warming up for what's ahead; at a bar, a party, or one spot. Either way, at this time of day, we're reminded that we're not static bodies. We ebb and flow with the changes of the day.

Some say, human beings used to sleep in two shifts; one after supper in the evening once the sun set, then they would wake in the thick of the night. And then comes the second sleep in the early hours, to wake again as the sun rose. The twilights.

Imagine that. The resting body aligning itself with these twilights. Absorbing unseen frequencies, ready to move through all stages of our awake-ness, both during the night, and day.

Many of us now operate on some unknown plane that we are yet to fully sync with. Our minds might be busy being dazzled and lured by the bright lights we've created. But, some might argue, there is a part of us, that remembers the times from before, a theory that could explain the insomnia that accompanies many of us during the night.

The natural rhythms of night and day, and us as living bodies moving through them has, in many ways, been distorted. Technology, with all its wondrous innovations, has with one hand, given us so much, and with the other hand, taken much away.

And so, to twilight. May we move with it; embracing its phases and savouring the changes they bring. May, at these times, we lean into the warmth of a loved one. Or the quiet within ourselves, or the performance we seek with others. May we observe and honour the journey, the transitions, the in-between space. And may we be reminded that one thing doesn't become another just like that, it transforms into it. Even if just fleetingly. May we experience an infinity of twilights.

Ends.

Audio description

0:00-01:19 Twilight by Etienne Roussel
02:18-03:31 Crickets at night
03:27-04:01 Twilight by ER
04:46-05:17 Twilight by ER
06:36-09:25 Twilight by ER
09:25-09:59 Busy street in Accra
09:35-10:01 Bats and birds
10:09-11:48 Twilight by ER
10:09-11:07 Late night road and residential
12:23-12:44 Twilight by ER

'Golden Blue Time, or The Promise of Twilight' and 'night shadows' by Billie McTernan, featuring Akosua Hanson

Sound design by Okhiogbe Omonblanks Omonhinmin and Billie McTernan