

Ch. 2 Centripetal Space

The Tensions of Centripetal Space: “Representing the metropolis is never an innocent gesture but one that is always motivated by cultural needs and ambitions” (89). Why didn’t I say that? That might well be the (second – can’t crowd out Grace Kelly) motto of this course. In describing the bravura and expensive aerial openings of *Criss Cross* (1949) and *The Big Combo* (1955)- two cities, two decades, city as backdrop for two stories of violence - Dimendberg suggests these apparently gratuitous openings speak to a “common spatial logic of cities” (centripetal) and “the growing cultural anxiety that the city had been eclipsed and its concentrated centers rendered inconsequential.” The openings depict a city without a focus for collective life, an undifferentiated abstract space under surveillance. The advance of abstract space is underscored in *Johnny One Eye* (1950), where the sign “Ultra modern apartment to be erected here” suggests modern architecture’s assault on Greenwich Village and the “spatial gap and temporal voids” in an urban space undergoing transformation. These are the tensions of centripetal space – a form of the urban uneasiness traced by Baudelaire and Benjamin, Kracauer and Berman, and more usually encountered in social and architectural histories than in Hollywood film. Noir also invokes this uneasiness, occasionally, with realistic sounds of the mechanical city (subways) and, more often, with the sounds of jazz in night clubs (invoking, by turns, angst, idealistic integration, and erotic longing).

Noir as Nonsynchronous and Nostalgic: Noir’s literary sources are generally from the ‘30s, but they were filmed in the ‘40s and ‘50s. Changes in the built environment – as well as the additions of directors, writers, cinematographers – give noir an amalgamated quality, drawing from the old and the new. The opening scene of *Johnny One Eye* – arch, brownstones, skyscrapers, Dutchmen, and waterfront as spatial layering of elements over three centuries – captures this while its skyline and harbor shots establish the “urban fabric as an integral part of the narrative” – both background and agent (92). The films’ contrast of vertical and horizontal axes of the city reinforces this, vertical pans for the newer modernist city of skyscrapers (often filmed from below to highlight the main character Martin Martin’s vulnerability), horizontal for the older brownstone neighborhoods where Martin seeks refuge. The vertical world is one where people are “alone, unfaced, unaided,” representing half of the dialectic of monuments vertical (the power of corporate capitalism) and horizontal (civic and public purposes). Horizontal structures like Penn and Grand Central stations recalled the 19th century and resisted the emerging vertical early in the 20th century and it is to this, Dimendberg suggests, that Martin flees (although the veterinarian who treats him links Martin to the highrise Times Square and violence). It is a version of the search for “the village within the city” that pervades writing about NY (and may explain Florey’s – the director – decision to move the literary location on east 53rd street (in Runyan’s story) to the cinematic location in Greenwich Village). Florey also adds a glass-lined modern Village apartment building not in the original story, again stressing the nonsynchronous anomaly of this older neighborhood and the tension inside it between gentrifying newcomers and old residents. The sentimentality of this odd film noir (despite its violence) is associated with the low-rise city and reflects a nostalgia for these older forms.

The emergence of centripetal space: Dimendberg means by centripetal space – or “centration” - not just the built environment but the cultural attitudes and beliefs associated with it. He traces it to the industrial revolution and the emergence of cities as centers of production, with overcrowding and bad health conditions. But at the turn of the 20th century, just as the rise of skyscraping architecture and civic architecture produced an even denser downtown, the rise of new modes of transportation and communication (mass transit, autos, telephones, radio, tv) generated a decentralization within the metropolitan centers. Commuter railways, helping to concentrate business at the center while dispersing resident at the periphery, epitomized the trend.

At this point, Dimendberg defines **abstract space** which I describe in a text box below – linking abstract space to this functional segregation and simultaneous centralization and decentralization (central business district and suburbanization).

The Urban Core as Representation of Space: The idea of an urban core – with public spaces and institutions that fostered collective life – shaped post-45 conceptions of what cities were and produced anxiety about their decline (as mass media, decentralization, automobility eroded the urban cores). Urban theorists and those planners who rejected statistical abstractions focused on the pedestrian and her ability to visualize both the city and her place in it. The well-being of the pedestrian became an index of urban viability. The “walking cure,” a means of orienting oneself in the core, figures in both urban theory and film noir. Giedion,, Hudnut,

and others called for a new monumentality to give shape and meaning to our civic and collective life – Hudnut thought he found it in Rockefeller Center (but Dimendberg reminds us RC is a tourist attraction and media spectacle, evidence that the idea of “city center” had become a mere “representation of space whose lack of corresponding spatial practice was conspicuous” 111). The CIAM (Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne) issued a manifesto, laying out what cores should be – anticipating pedestrian zones and shopping malls, office plazas and neighborhood promenades, efforts to recapture the planning of the Italian renaissance in the age of the automobile and mass media. But even as CIAM looked to the core to restore human connection, spontaneity, participation, civic consciousness, the decentralizing force of autos and mass media (which the core was defined in opposition to and antidote for) overran the core (i.e. Times Square is not Piazza San Marco). City cores had become, more than anything, an empty focal point that serves as the image of the city. These empty focal points figure in film noir as well (Times Square, giant railroad stations) – but that’s developed in the next chapter. For now, Dimendberg ends by discussing the failure of the new, post-45 cores (linked to NYC’s revised zoning code), with their “space positive” skyscrapers and broad plazas. Giacometti’s sculpture captures the isolation of people passing one another in such a plaza, together yet unconnected. Empty space and human separation, a void suggesting an absence of relations, these anxieties link abstract space and film noir. Giacometti’s fear of the void, of “vertiginous dispersion in space,” his linking of “nausea and the abyss” (aside from recalling Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*), suggests the “psychic impact of the empty spaces” of the postwar city, its “vacant buildings, endless parking lots, and urban redevelopment projects” (117). Giacometti’s rejected sculpture for the Chase Manhattan plaza (a larger than life female) suggests the desire to fill the void with plentitude (like Kitty in *Scarlet Street*, the femme fatale that alienated men gravitate toward).

Abstract Space: From pages 102-108: Lefebvre lamented the disintegration of a language of city building (what Christopher Alexander called *A Pattern Language*) that taught us how to read and construct urban space. In its place we now have abstract space (shopping center, office park, housing tract), spaces devoted to a single function (dwelling, leisure, exchange, production, transport) but lacking the collective and cultural meaning of a market square (leisure, exchange, politics) or city gate (political, ceremonial, commercial). The language of city building that we have lost is captured by Paul Zucker’s 1959 study of the relations among building forms, a grammar of unity and diversity, dimensions and proportions, width and length of open areas, angle of intersecting streets, location of fountains, monuments, and other objects - an arrangement that shapes in a satisfying way one’s visual and kinetic experience of a place (a “psychological parking place” in Zucker’s apt phrase - apt because it includes the fear that real parking places are destroying our capacity to recreate this). Zucker’s distinction between urban spaces that are “holes” rather than “wholes” underscores postwar metropolitan space devised for specific economic ends, social policies, or technological functions” rather than for “the corporeal and aesthetic experience” (104) of urbanites (a tendency he traces, perhaps unfairly, to Haussmann and, more appropriately to the indiscriminate gridiron plan first adopted by New York City in 1811). Lefebvre complicates all this with three concepts, spatial practice (how spatial arrangements reproduce social relations, facilitating interaction or chance meetings or emphasizing privacy or seclusion), the representation of space (the ideas that shape spatial practice - conceptions of what interiors and exteriors, tops and bottoms, should be like), and spaces of representation (spatial practices that shape subjective experience). Lefebvre codified a host of criticisms of postwar metropolitan space best captured by the quotation for Sert on 107. He then argues that abstract space in all its forms can be seen - and indeed experienced - in film noir, often in contrast to the disappearing forms of the centripetal (centered) city.

Dimendberg, 119-165 “Walking Cures”

Labyrinth as antidote to panorama? Many films noir take a ground-level view of the metropolis, the view of the urban walker, the user of the city, as opposed to the panoramic view of the spectator and planner. Accentuating the difference between the emerging post-war metropolis and the disappearing centripetal spaces of the pre-war city, such noirs provided suburbanized cinema audiences (“whose direct experience might well produce anxiety” - 121) a safe look at disappearing sites and spaces (such as Penn Station in *Killer’s Kiss*). So I’m questioning whether these “walking cures” really cured anything at all, or rather allowed suburban audiences to have it both ways (which D. acknowledges, perhaps, on 122: “a species of nostalgia”). But it might also be seen as “a celebration of the city” or even “an attempt to realize the ideal of ‘redemptive’ criticism advocated by Benjamin” (122). In any event, such episodes in film noir coincided with new theories of “the experience of the pedestrian” (121) and were an important part of the film noir cycle.

Remembering Tillary Street: Frank Thompson is hit by falling debris in 1942’s *Street of Chance*, losing the memory of the past year but regaining memory of his life before that year. Dimendberg’s analysis hinges on the role of the city in losing and regaining those memories and, more broadly, on the link between “subjectivity

and spatial remembrance” (124). Place is a repository of memory, as many theorists have noted (including Edward Casey, discussed on 125) and the film suggests the loss of those place-based memories in Thompson’s wife’s mention of his personal effects and scraps of paper that, alone, might have restored his memory. The city, undergoing dramatic transformation (1938 destruction of tenements, building of new public housing and private developments, Stuyvesant Town), could not buoy up memory (with psychic costs suggested in agoraphobia and fear of surveillance – Thompson tracked through glass windows – as well as the indifferent strangers he meets, emphasizing his own rootlessness). In search of his memories, Thompson returns to “a slum street, swarming with humanity” (like NYC’s lower east side), an instance of Dimendberg’s walking cure. Dimendberg suggests such disorientation and loss of memory had become common in metropolitan America, 1939-1959, and Thompson’s trauma and loss of memory “serve as a powerful allegory for the disappearance of familiar architectural landmarks and neighborhoods” (130). At the end of this section, Dimendberg introduced Siegfried Kracauer’s Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality (1960) as a parallel investigation of a loss of memory and experience, and one that anticipates a postmodernist indictment of modernist architecture and planning, particularly “the credo that architecture [and planning] can systematically remake the city on a large scale” (131).

Fragmentation and Contingency Kracauer, in arguing with Proust, sees photographic images not as mirrors perfectly capturing an objective reality, but as subjective: photographers “structure their sense perceptions” and viewers “bring a range of emotions” to the images (132). If done properly, however, Kracauer believes film “strips away our desires and unconscious attachments to reveal characteristics of the visible world” (133), overcoming our usual blindness to the actual physical characteristics of things. This shock to our perceptions leaves us fragmented – instead of the sense of mastery we get from panoramic views, we recognize “contingency, lack of control, and otherness. . . an aesthetic experience on par with the historical crisis of experience” (Hansen’s words, 133). This is Nino Frank’s lived experience again, “a wound that never heals” whereby physical reality punctures the subjectivity of it. “Film renders visible what we did not, or perhaps even could not, see before its advent” and thus it can “promote the redemption of physical reality.” Hoping to “renew our perceptions” and “redeem experience,” Kracauer compares the spectator to the flaneur in being drawn to the flux, the contingency, the possibilities of the crowd, the city, the passing scene. The film goes at some point even loses concern with the story and is drawn to the images of mingling, the opportunity of drama. Dimendberg then locates Kracauer’s transhistorical discussion in a specific place and time: read 135, bottom: His spectator is the American occupant of the postwar city, an occupant of abstract space being shocked into seeing the disappearing contours and landmarks, streets, stations, bars. Killer’s Kiss (1955) not only shows such disappearing spaces (Penn Station) but shows that chance encounters is as much, if not more, the driving force of film noir than are fate and inevitability.

Times Square and the Urban Fragment: Killer’s Kiss also provides a catalogue of public spaces for walking, mingling, watching, waiting – a pedestrian’s realm as counterpoint to private dwellings and car-filled streets. Penn Station especially captures a calmness, waiting, and the chance and contingency inherent in crowds that Kracauer saw as central to effective film. The station serves as an “anachronistic haven” in the city, itself about to be demolished. As a “stimulus shield” in the modernist, high-rise, auto-dominated city, Penn Station also provides the “prototype for the narrative.” Davey the boxer and Gloria the dance-hall girl both don shields for their work “as objects of an anonymous urban gaze” now even more removed via television (139). They also invoke the anonymous gaze in their dealing with one another, spying on each other’s apartments but ignoring one another in public. Only sound (Gloria’s scream) not sight brings them together. Their own shabby occupations are linked (140-1) to the shabbiness of Times Square, “a site of ruins of loss, the space of fissured subjectivity” (143). The fight in the mannequin factory provides “an allegory for the death of experience in the centripetal city” (146). But at the end of the section, Dimendberg considers Times Square – or at least Gloria’s walk through it – as a “palpable combination of defeat and solace” (147), a walking cure in which she appropriates the city as her own. And Killer’s Kiss as a whole suggests film noir’s capacity “to wrest fragments of the past” and make us aware of the city’s position and vulnerability in time.

Footsteps in the City: Even as film noir experimented with walking cures, French and American theorists studied the experience of walking and mentally mapping the city. The French Situationists recorded their impressions of threatened French neighborhoods on their strolls (even as French film critics embraced film noir) and Kevin Lynch examined how residents tried to make mental maps of the paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks that made a city legible or illegible. Footsteps in the Night (1957) explored the homogenization

of space and social isolation in a story of interchangeable bungalow motels that led to the murder of the wrong man.

Representing Bunker Hill: A startlingly coherent neighborhood in sprawling, suburban Los Angeles, Bunker Hill had begun as an elite residence in the 1880s and 90s and slid into slum-status after World War I. It was targeted for urban renewal in 1945 and swept up into the urban renewal schemes that followed the Housing Act of 1949 and disappeared by the end of the '60s. It remains a politically-charged memory. Developers had long wanted to flatten its hill and build new condos but others saw the obstacle to traffic and the elevation as assets and called for rehabilitation rather than destruction. Those who wanted it torn down cited social pathology, blight, fire hazards, low tax base, and high service costs. Dimendberg cautions that we have no history that can confirm the truth of these charges, but the development lobby (including unions) got their way. Film noir highlighted Bunker Hill in the 1940s and 50s – either calling attention to its potential loss or serving as harbinger of the theme-park designers who would exploit the Angels Flight in the 90s (or perhaps both). Act of Violence (1949) plays off Bunker Hill with bright suburbia in a tale of a score to be settled between veterans who are now successful developer and disgruntled cripple. The film features a feverish run through the neighborhood. Kiss Me Deadly (1955) offers a more coherent and attractive view of Bunker Hill, juxtaposing its pedestrian scale and street life to the homogenized and traffic-choked spaces of suburban LA. Dimendberg ends the section with an account of the removal of the Angels Flight to sever the new downtown from the seedy neighborhoods nearby and the trade marking of the name for commercial exploitation. Penn Station has also attracted redevelopment schemes, to move the railroad station into the old post office. Film noir couldn't save these sites from destruction (as they appeared at the key moment in time, when the buildings had been taken for granted and before they might have taken on a new appreciation), but the films may have played a role in the nostalgia we now feel for these lost sights – and in the postmodern urge to recreate them as theme parks, as empty surfaces.