

## Dimendberg, ch. 5 **Simultaneity, the Media Environment, and the End of Film Noir**

**Why the End of Noir?** There have been various explanations for noir's decline in the 'fifties and disappearance by the 'sixties – absorption into TV series, decline of "B" picture making, Hollywood blacklisting of noir talent, a growing interest in the "strange" and documentary realism. But Dimendberg, of course, tries to tie noir's disappearance to spatial changes, to the shift from centripetal space (noir's natural setting) to centrifugal space which briefly invigorated but then extinguished the noir cycle. The growing prominence of the mass media in post-1949 noirs especially testifies to the growth of "a new range of spatial fears and anxieties" (210). Those anxieties were tied to the growing ascendancy of TV, the civil defense focus on "defensive dispersal," and the dawn of the computer/information age. Films noir increasingly focused on non-urban settings, communications networks, and the fantasy of escape to "natural" settings. The growing incorporation of centrifugal spaces in noir is paralleled by a shift in surveillance mechanisms, less the human body in centripetal space and more the instant and simultaneous reporting on distant events to mobile recipients through radio (home-bound tv would seem not to fit for "mobile" recipients – one of those annoying habits of Dimendberg, not to ask himself nagging questions about the assertions he makes; in Losey's M this is resolved by having a television in a store's display window with a crowd gathered around). Theoretically, the urban community now emerged more from communication links and networks than from actual proximity in space (neighborhood). Dimendberg sees radio as the key force in this but then he (confusingly) ties it back to the newspaper's front page – discontinuous and diverse stories arranged for simultaneous impact on the reader. Bringing it back to film, he sees the theme of simultaneity (rapid circulation of information, transcending spatial separation, encouraging a virtual centralization) as the key element the experience of centrifugal space and appearing more and more in film from 1949 on.

**Simultaneity and the Media Environment:** Losey's 1951 remake of M highlights the role of TV in bringing the news to centrifugal Los Angeles – a precursor of the TV event like OJ's car ride. But the film also centers on Bunker Hill, a centripetal survival in the suburbanizing metropolis where radio-controlled taxis join in the hunt for a child-murderer. The gaze out the windshield of the taxi drivers captures LA's abstract, centrifugal spaces and is played off the arcade-like architecture of the 1893 Bradbury building (wrought-iron decoration, glass skylight, central courtyard) – an older vision of modernity, now antiquated and suggesting the demise of pedestrian-based urbanism and public space (particularly as underworld figures invade the building, smashing windows in search of the murderer). The film also subtly plays off (and offers a critique of) the media event of HUAC's public hearings in Washington that went forward while the film was being made (several people who worked on the film had been subjects of the witch hunt). It thus links the mass media to larger social conflicts. Other noirs also feature radio and simultaneity, as in Plunder Road where a character comments on radio as a perfect system of surveillance even as the film itself suggests its relative ineffectiveness in a sprawling centrifugal landscape.

**Time:** Time in centrifugal space is treated as a precious commodity but rigidly structured and scheduled (traffic surveys, commuting times, the costs of congestion). Just as it is the materiality of their gold heist and the friction of their drive across the crowded highways of LA (rather than new means of surveillance) that trap the thieves in Plunder Road, the criminals in The Asphalt Jungle are trapped by their own subjectivity, their own refusal to abide by the rigid schedules, measurements, itineraries of the centrifugal metropolis. One is caught when he lingers too long in a café, watching the rhythms of a young girl dancing (opting out of the rush, appropriating time); the other is drawn out of the city back to nature, to his beloved farm, having abandoned "the logical calculation of time and space evident in their planning and realization of the jewel

robbery" (234). I guess the point is that those who opt out of abstract and centrifugal space, who try to appropriate time for subjectivity, wind up getting destroyed.

**The Media Environment:** The Big Carnival captures the media environment as bigger and more inclusive than its representatives as Charles Tatum (Kirk Douglas) is greeted in a New Mexican town not as an imperial power lording it over some backward colonial site, but as a co-conspirator with others pursuing their own self-interest. The film also juxtaposes centripetal and centrifugal space as Tatum arrives in New Mexico looking for the story that will restore his reputation in the big city. The story unfolds against a contrast between absolute (sacred) space, the Indian cliff dwellings and tombs that Leo Mimosa exploits and then is trapped by, and abstract space, the space of Tatum's media carnival that he creates by writing about Mimosa's ordeal. Tatum's efforts, creating a tv spectacle examined critically here by the cinema, results in a new suburban-like community at the base of the mountain (a parking lot full of cars and people connected only by the mass media spectacle). As Tatum's city of on-lookers engulfs the cliff dwellings, Baudrillard's vision of media-created space take shape: "With the disappearance of the public place, advertising invades everything (the street, the monument, the market, the stage, language)....It determines architecture and the creation of super-objects....Today our only architecture is just that: huge screens upon which moving atoms, particles and molecules are refracted. The public stage, the public place have been replaced by a gigantic circulation, ventilation, and ephemeral connecting space" (238). Tatum's media carnival is a community of consuming spectators, essentially an advertising stunt – a metaphor for 'fifties America and the gap between "the space of mass society and the space of true community, the later invoked only by its glaring absence" (238). Tatum crafts the story according to media needs ignoring Mimosa's impending death or his wife's concerns and values. The film also points to the declining importance of centripetal space – the media is simultaneously everywhere, its power not located in a place but in its ubiquitous images and sounds. Director Billy Wilder underscores the point by including a character from Double Indemnity's Pacific All-Risk Insurance company, inviting a comparison of the LA space of that earlier film with "the garbage strewn site of the carnival" at the end of the film.

**Domesticity and the 1950s Media Environment:** Like some many other metropolitan agencies (sewers, water, electricity, gas, telephone, radio), television penetrated the supposedly sheltered domestic space of the suburban home, bringing the chaos and violence of the wider world (including "all the world's broken cities" 242) into our living rooms. The Killer Is Loose (1956) explores this phenomenon, this breakdown of interior and exterior space, beginning with its opening images of sprawling, centrifugal LA. Poole, a failed bank robber, escapes the prison farm and returns to the city to exact revenge on Detective Wagner who accidentally killed Poole's wife while capturing him. The police cannot prevent Poole from penetrating the city while suburban televisions chronicle the drama for us, bringing the exterior drama inside (a point reinforced when Poole appears in a suburban kitchen). The ending of the film, tracking away from the dead Poole in Wagner's front lawn, again places the suburban home in a vast expanse of centrifugal space but now revealed as no sanctuary from the larger world. Murder by Contract (1958) depicts a hired killer's effort to murder a female witness under protective custody in her suburban home. But Billie, the witness, frustrates Claude (the hit man) and appears in control of her domestic life (avoiding electrocution by Claude's efforts, for example, when she turns on her tv by remote control). Even when he penetrates the home through the sewer system, he falters before the deed and her self-assurance (she promises to give him a break and not scream while he escapes). Neither helpless victim nor femme fatale, Billie suggests the rise of a new sort of female subject in centrifugal space. But the film also undermines the inviolability of the suburban home.

**City of Fear and Defensive Dispersal:** “In an atomic war, congested cities become death traps,” Edward Teller warned in 1948. Much postwar political and urban planning commentary focused on the need to decentralize population, some promising it as the road to peace. Ribbon or lineal cities would undercut the effectiveness of aerial bombing. But speed also promised safety – speed in getting out of town in an emergency – and demanded new traffic arteries. Film noir largely ignored this discourse in the 1940s (or at least lingered on centripetal space) but in the ‘fifties the potential for mass destruction, and the related drive for dispersal, shaped the genre. City of Fear (1959) features an escaped con who thinks he’s stolen heroin but actually has radioactive cobalt-60. So the detectives must track him down in total secrecy (to avoid panic) and top speed, dividing the city into quadrants and sending out police cars with Geiger counters. LA’s density (rather than its famed sprawl) is central to the fear and anxiety – a fear reinforced by panoramic shots of the LA basin. But otherwise the film ignores landmarks and specificity, reserving its key moment of panic for a glass and white-walled modernist gas station that is, like nuclear terrorism, a product of modernist technology. And the old methods of surveillance are helpless – only the Geiger counters tracks the unwitting terrorist. A B picture made in 7 days for \$100,000, the film marks, perhaps, the end of the noir cycle – an end coinciding with growing competition from TV but also the end of the classic centripetal metropolis. While centrifugal space reinvigorated the last phase of noir, the road film offered a better means of addressing the new spatial order.

The fear of atomic attack had sped the demise of centripetal space on which noir had once thrived – suburban dispersal promised safety from Soviet missiles but also from internal disorder and unrest (slum clearance and redevelopment as rooting out domestic subversion). “Not an atom bomb, just the result of tearing down certain buildings which had become unsafe, before the general demolition in the fall,” read the caption in a booklet on Stuyvesant Town in 1947. The noir detective might be seen as the expression of the “virile mastery” (257) that called for decentralization and civil defense in the face of nuclear terror, a symbol of “a generalized need for security and respite from cultural anxiety.” But the decaying body of Ryker, the unwitting terrorist in City of Fear, suggests “the unraveling of a postwar concept of masculinity” (257). Then Dimendberg shifts, inexplicably (or perhaps it is the digression on masculinity that is inexplicable) back to space and lived experience. Much of noir yearned for the old centripetal metropolis and one reviewer greeted City of Fear by suggesting that “watching passing automobiles” was thin gruel for entertainment, to be had for free on any street, and that “this is just about the only bait *City of Fear* offers to lure the public into the theater.” But Dimendberg sees this more or less as a tribute to the film’s investigation of lived experience. The film marks the end of one cultural period, when the darkness of the city seemed the greatest threat, and opens a new one when greater terrors threatened. But the film, Dimendberg concludes, is ultimately hopeful, showing LA avoiding nuclear catastrophe and offering a “wishful image of collectivity” in its twinkling panoramas. We might emulate its optimism in facing “the challenges posed by inhabiting the spaces – real and virtual – of the twenty-first century” (259).