

Dimendberg, ch. 4 “Centrifugal Space”

Valorizing Speed, Losing Place: Dimendberg finds in the stories and films of Raymond Chandler evidence of “new experiences of time, speed, and distance” (169) in an era of decentralization and suburbanization. Valorizing speed and using the detective as “a kind of mobile perceptual center” (171) in a centerless city, Chandler’s stories alternate between attention and distraction, interiors and exteriors, and offer an automobilist’s view of Los Angeles (often at night, dematerialized in a vast array of lights). But there is also a new sense of time, a “fascination with nonsynchronous remnants from earlier historical moments” (170) and a despair that the old “bony structure” of LA and other cities is disappearing (like about Dark City in this context).

Speed Traps: Dimendberg is great on the opening of Double Indemnity, a film you just have to see. We first see Neff speeding through the streets (and I showed you this), nearly hitting the maintenance workers on the deteriorating LA streetcar system. We see relatively little of the city and what we see are discontented spatial nodes, or rather a few discreet places connected only by speeding automobiles. The film comments often on technological determinism, murder “straight down the line” and the conspirators as streetcar passengers forced “to the end of the line.” The Pacific All-Risk office building is just one element in “a rational and expedient mechanism” that orders the lives of the metropolitan population (corporations, highways, automobiles). This rational and expedient mechanism puts speed, flow, and mechanized, individual communication and transportation (automobile, telephone, tv) first. Cities increasingly lack central spaces that bring together diverse groups, even lack traditional architectural elements and focus on highways and flows of invisible communications (ed: here again in the intersection with baseball and those parks and the public festivals in a privatizing society). Even surveillance focuses now more on automobiles than on buildings and crowds. In 1949 (year of the National Housing Act, a dramatic increase in tv ownership, the opening of the NJ turnpike, the first transcontinental flight under 4 hours) also witnessed a spate of centrifugal noirs. Dimendberg, however, cautions against a technological determinism – the technology for decentralization and speed had existed since WWI. He looks for to ideas and attitudes, first to the anti-city ideas of planners like Le Corbusier and Wright and then to a more pervasive cultural interest in speed and mobility.

Highways Without Friction: The radical transformation of the built environment in centrifugal directions began in the 1920s and 1930s with the growing interest in “townless highways” and the divorce of transportation and residence (i.e. in contrast to streets that once served as extensions of settlements in which much of social, cultural, and political life took place). The quintessential abstract space, highways accommodated one function – speeding mechanical vehicles. Federal agencies began supporting highway construction in 1916 and soon began laying plans for arterial highways that would puncture to the heart of cities and destroy neighborhoods. Norman Bel Geddes’s design for General Motor’s Futurama exhibit at the 1939 World’s Fair in New York City (as well as Geddes’s books) captured the cultural fascination with speed and added arguments about the highway as a key to economic growth and national integration. A film buff himself, Geddes designed Futurama as a hypermodern diorama or panorama (185), or perhaps as the “rational and expedient mechanism” discussed above, a multi-media experience that controlled the attention and perspective of the visitors, moved them around in cars, simulated the driving experience, promised speeds of 100 mph, and landed them at the end in an intersection of the future city 1960. Geddes removed all conflicts and tensions (between GM’s

dedication to laissez-faire and the federal subsidies necessary to his vision, for example) from his utopian depiction of speed and frictionless mobility.

The new urban reality: mobility and surveillance: The war moved vast populations outside of cities and across the nation and also focused attention on the defense and security implications of highways. Traffic surveys – cordon stations, license plate compilations – owed something to military thinking and captured the centrifugal quality of urban life. Rapid movement through space, tied to a schedule, replaced landmarks and city centers as the central element of city life.

Reckoning Time, Escaping the City: Plunder Road and dissatisfaction with the Highway: Fortune Magazine's The Exploding Metropolis included a careful study of just how long it took commuters to escape the city at the end of the day - a sign of the times. The authors wondered if accommodating the automobile in the city would take so much room that little room would remain for the things that made cities attractive. Nevertheless, highway construction became the national religion after 1945, as Americans increasingly thought of city life in terms of time (commutes, passage through) rather than space (places to enjoy). By the end of the 'fifties, planners envisioned robot-like cars that whisked commuters to and from the city at 100 mph while they rested comfortably – just as critics like Mumford began to decry the highway's destruction of both city and countryside. Film noir, at this juncture in the late 'fifties, submerged the city into larger metropolitan landscapes of highways and centrifugal space. Dimendberg focuses especially on Plunder Road (1957), appearing just 18 months after the passage of the federal interstate highway act of 1956. The film begins with a pleasurable invocation of speed and the open road, a view of highway lines and arrows from a speeding vehicle. But it quickly complicates this, depicting a flat, featureless metropolis and equally flat characters. Its space is Lefebvre's abstract space, geared to one function (transit), engaging one sense (sight). Space loses its volume and becomes nothing but surface (200). The characters are obsessed with time – the key to their attempt to rob a gold shipment from a train and move it unnoticed through centrifugal space. But just as the train's predictability and materiality left it vulnerable to the thieves, the sheer weight of the gold traps one group of thieves at a highway weigh station (where they are found to be 4,500 pounds over weight). And when they use a foundry to melt down the gold, the materiality of pollution also draws attention to the crime. The final negation of the highway's dream of frictionless movement through space comes with the last group of thieves is caught in a LA traffic jam which leads to their capture (and the death of the mastermind by jumping off an overpass into traffic). Gridlock "alludes to a crisis of belief in the possibility of spatial mastery" as both criminals and commuters run up against "the irrational and unpredictable social order of centrifugal space itself" (204) . Plunder Road is a rare inquiry into the "fantasies and desires [for frictionless motion and speed] stimulated by centrifugal space" (205), revealing both the hopes and dreams associated with the highway and the role of cultural representation in promoting those dreams ("I drive, therefore I am," Dimendberg concludes).