

Dimendberg, Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity

Introduction: **Neither Here Nor There: The Uneasy Transition from City to Suburb:** For Dimendberg, film noir is preoccupied with “the traumas of unrecoverable time and space” and an inability to live in the past or the present. He links both with his own fascination with the films as he grew up in a shabby NYC where film noir’s spaces were disappearing, an experience he thinks is representative of the nation as a whole. He thinks the films give us unique access to the spaces of the 1940s and 1950s and offers lessons about those spaces for us in the present. He finds a clue to those lessons and the films’ meaning in Ernest Bloch’s observation about the Nazis capitalizing on “the nostalgia for older cultural forms and relations of production” among peasants and other social groups. History had become “polyrhythmic and multi-spacial,” no longer moving along a linear path. Film noir captures that, invoking the past (in disappearing urban space) and invoking the future (in a new road-oriented world). The tension isn’t between precapitalist peasants and modern capitalism, of course (as in Bloch’s version), but between “a residual American culture and urbanism” and “its liquidation by the technological and social innovations” of the post-1945 period. The paragraph on 4 that begins “It conveys a palpable fascination...” is key. Film noir records the struggles of working-class, urban Americans as the older world of transparent social relations (traced by the detective) gave way to more dispersed and opaque forms of power in suburbanization and the dominance of impersonal corporations. See Hitchcock’s North By Northwest on this. My take on this: *“Too often we forget that the suburb has been built at a terrifying cost,” a popular study of the city observed in 1955, particularly in “the abandonment of the city, the center of our civilization.” Exploring the rootlessness of its characters, who clung uneasily to the seedy commercialism of the disappearing city or drifted uneasily into the new suburban order, noir called attention to this momentous decision, inviting us to reconsider it.*

A Film Record of Lived Experience: The French invented the term “film noir” in 1946 to describe gritty stories about hard-boiled detectives featuring dark lighting and darker plots, crime, violence, dangerous women, voice-over narration, shadows. Dimendberg locates in Nino Frank’s 1946 essay another key element, the sensitivity of film noir’s audience to the “impression of real life, of lived experience,” that differentiated it from detective films of the past. The narrative device reinforced that, producing a fragmented story with rapid transitions that gave “a greater impression of lived experience.” Not simply a quest for realism, the emphasis on lived experience (on the part of both spectator and the film itself) captures a concern with “temporality and spatiality” that addresses both the concentrated urban space of the 1940s metropolis and the dispersed and fragmented spaces of the suburban world. The continuing fascination with film noir registers a nostalgia for a cinematic and urban experience, an experience of time and space, an image of the city, that theme parks and yuppie lifestyle enclaves cannot provide.

Anxiety and Disorientation in a Suburbanizing Nation: The films register the transition from a metropolitan to a suburban world (see first full paragraph on 7), a nostalgia for older urban forms, and an anxiety about new urban realities. The loss of public space, destruction of

neighborhoods, the homogenization of life and growth of surveillance, are all present in film noir. Protagonists move from center to periphery, but are comfortable nowhere. The fascination with space - the move from city to country but also aerial views, crowd scenes, homecomings to the city - “reflects their satisfaction of complex cultural needs.” Film noir is just one side of the cultural contradictions of the 1940s and 1950s, along with the Beats and abstract expressionism, that reflected deep anxiety amidst global dominance and domestic prosperity. Film noir helps us trace that anxiety to “rapid and unprecedented changes in the built environment.” With European cities in ruins, US cities faced their own physical challenges including deteriorating infrastructure from years of depression and heavy use during the war. Suburbanization and urban renewal - highways, TV, destroyed neighborhoods, glass office towers, ranch houses, public housing, superblocks, shopping centers - profoundly and rapidly reshaped everyday life as well as “perceptions of time and space, bodily rhythms, and experiences of speed, distance, and density.”

Requiem for a Built Environment: Other commentators have, of course, linked the city to film noir, but more as an underlying mythic structure, theme, or vision. Dimendberg is adding a new emphasis on geography, city planning, and architectural theory, as well as urban and cultural theory. He is examining “the city” in film noir, but specifically the historical, changing postwar city in film noir (the difference here isn’t just in the focus of critical commentary but in the films themselves; elsewhere I’ve tried to explain a mythical, and misleading, use of “the city” in earlier films of the 1920s and 1930s; noir then is a refreshing move toward realism - JF, 2026). He urges us to recognize the destructive power of postwar planning and redevelopment, akin to the destruction of war, and to see film noir as an aid-to-memory to a society losing the physical basis of its memories (and experiencing loss and displacement as a result). For us, reexamining film noir should sharpen our sense of historical difference, of how different that era was to our own, and to heighten our sense of our own period as “merely one outcome among many contingent possibilities.” 11

Symptom and Catalyst: Without insisting that he has the one true definition of film noir, Dimendberg argues that exploring the relationship between two-dimensional representations of space and three-dimensional lived space gets to the heart of what made film noir powerful and popular. Abandoning the quest for the one true film noir formula or definition has the benefit of focusing our investigation on “negotiations between creators, shared conventions, and social practices manifested in all cultural production.” Thus both cinema and the built environment are “mutually implicated in the construction of common spatial fantasies and anxieties,” and film noir in particular served as both “symptom and a catalyst of spatial transformations.” 12 He also links film noir’s resistance to technicolor and the wide screen, its backward and marginalized aesthetic, to the disappearing urban scene it captured and the century-old tradition of photographic representation of the city.

Regimenting Machine and Homogenizing Space: Again without asserting that audiences always and everywhere took the same meaning from film noir (responses may have ranged from benign enjoyment to anxiety), Dimendberg cites the literary sources and cinematographic

conventions of film noir to emphasize its anxieties about the city. Noir cinematography transfigures the city, not toward social transcendence but as “a highly rationalized and alienating system of exploitative drudgery permitting few possibilities of escape.” Once romanticized as a new social order, the factory and the machine had now remade all of society into a “nightmare of spatial regimentation, consumer manipulation, and corporate economic control.” Where once commentators worried about city freedom giving rise to moral chaos in the individual, now both Billy Wilder and Lewis Mumford, film maker and cultural critic, worried about “the potential loss of individual identity and the growing power of a technological society organized by new spatial forms and the mass media.” No longer a nightmare of spatial segregation and classbound privilege (Lang’s *Metropolis*), the city threatens to become “a homogenized and homogenizing abstract space” as captured in Hopper’s “Approaching a City.” “There is a certain fear and anxiety, and a great visual interest in the things that one sees coming into a city,” Hopper wrote. The city center is nowhere to be seen in Hopper’s painting, a blank concrete wall its most prominent element. Dimendberg compares the painting, which helped shape the noir vision, to Mumford’s critique of Stuyvesant Town as an architecture of “control” shaped by soulless bureaucrats or in Mumford’s narration of Steiner and Van Dyke’s *The City*.

The end of the introduction is maddeningly opaque but I guess the point is that film noir is one part of a larger cultural grappling with the simultaneous realities of centripetal and centrifugal space (a grappling seen also in debates about urban renewal, the reception of live TV, and superhighways).

Ch. 1 Naked Cities

The Panorama Punctures the Labyrinth The chapter hinges on the twin urban skills of noticing others and disregarding others, skills dramatized in the opening scene of bodies crushed in centripetal space (the subway) in *Pickup on South Street*. Disregard allows the pickpocket to steal a wallet, but the knowledge that urban anonymity provides a rich milieu for crime also gave rise to strategies of surveillance represented by the cop and the FBI man on the subway. Simmel spoke to the anonymity of urban life, the indifference to strangers, but a vast literature also focused on identifying the threatening from the benign stranger. These techniques of surveillance, of classifying and locating bodies in the urban realm, culminates in the anthropomorphizing of the city itself, the naked city subjected to technological scrutiny and surgical planning (think panorama). The chapter uses the trope (i.e. a figure of speech or cliché) of “the naked city” to explore the growing sense of vulnerability, isolation, and exposure people felt in post-war cities. He also suggests the grasping at this organic metaphor, which collapses at the end of his chapter, is evidence of a disorientation, a loss of a coherent image of the city.

The Techniques and Devices of Surveillance: The story of the eagle-eyed George from Grand Central’s Oyster Bar sets up a discussion of the highly developed techniques of “metropolitan specularity” (24), the skills of “physiognomic description and spatial memory” (25). The city, its daily routines, its immense crowds, is both seer and seen, sometimes hiding, sometimes revealing the criminal. Film noir adds modern settings (skyscraper, bus terminal, jazz club,

automobile, expressway) to the streets, neighborhoods, railroad stations, and department stores of the 19th century city. All pervade film noir and are integrated into a decomposition and segmentation of physical bodies and urban space driven by a desire for observation, detection, and control (i.e. fingerprints, photographs, answering machines, panopticons as leaving traces that can be followed; corresponding to the breaking up and rearranging of urban space from Haussmann to modern urban planning and its superblocks, shopping malls, housing tracts). Cinema participated in this with its focus on “discrete temporal instants”(27).

Ann Terry’s Hat: Isolation, Entrapment, Exposure: This confusing section (28-36) continues to hinge on the twin urban skills of noticing others and disregarding others and links those skills to urban space (it might help to read the plot summary of the Phantom Lady that I’ve sent you). The skill of noticing, of surveillance, alternates between “generalizable descriptions” and “individual measurements,” the “generalized look” and the “contingent instance” of crime and deviance. The discussion of The Street with No Name and He Walked By Night introduces the “generalized look” of urban space (30) - one city standing for cities in general, one “bad” neighborhood standing for the whole bad city but also the tendency of individualized measurements to divide the city - and the body - into fragments (LA as suburbs in search of a city; the facial recognition process building up a picture of the subject from fragments). The discussion of The Phantom Lady then links the “generalized look” and the “contingent instance” to the “incessant struggle between perceptual indifference and engaged cognition, forgetfulness and remembrance” (31). Ann Terry’s hat suggests both sides - the hat standing in for the person (a generalized indifference to classifiable individuals), but the hat also being the trace, the clue that can lead to recognition and remembrance. Building on the first, the indifference, the use of mirrors and gazes and anonymity underscores the transitory and empty nature of many urban encounters and “entrapment in socially defined identities” (35). Building on the second, the engaged cognition (when Richmond and the cops interrogate strangers to try to solve the mystery) brings forth a fear of the “naked city,” exposed to surveillance, without walls, substance, refuge, cover. The film’s references to the coming modernist city - all glass-walled skyscrapers and model suburbs of open spaces and sunlight - expose all to surveillance and gives rise to film noir’s desire for “a space that is neither too insubstantial nor too constricting, neither too anonymous nor too visible” (36), a neighborhood perhaps, like those being bulldozed or deprived of investment.