New Approaches to Cinematic Space

New Approaches to Cinematic Space aims to discuss the process of creation of cinematic spaces through moving images and the subsequent interpretation of their purpose and meaning. Throughout 17 chapters, this edited collection will attempt to identify and interpret the formal strategies used by different filmmakers to depict real or imaginary places and turn them into abstract, conceptual spaces. The contributors to this volume will specifically focus on a series of systems of representation that go beyond the mere visual reproduction of a given location to construct a network of meanings that ultimately shapes our spatial worldview.

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3.2 The Urban and the Domestic

Spaces of American Film Noir

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Urban and domestic spaces are at the core of the American film noir developed in the 1940s and 1950s. The connection between such spaces and noir cannot simply be considered as motivational –an association between city and crime– or protective –a separation between home and violence– but as part of the American spatial culture of the time, as well as an imagination of it. This essay will thus discuss the urban and domestic dimensions in several classical noirs by addressing four major interconnected topics or scales: territory, city, surroundings and homes. What emerges is a sociology of this genre through the linking of various times and places with the darkness and restlessness of a nightmare.

American noir was produced in a period of US history governed by fear. The wounds left by the Great Depression were fresh and communism was seen as a permanent menace. As David Reid and Jayne L. Walker put it, "[t]he classic phase of film noir –from 1944 to 1950– coincided with a period in which the United States had gained a 'preponderance of power' in the world" (1993, p. 88)and its rulers were determined to secure it. These films were interested in the uneasiness that arose from this situation and in how this feeling was experienced within space during a particular historical period. Moreover, "[i]nvoking the past while anxiously imagining the future, films noir reveal multiple spatialities, no less than multiple temporalities" (Dimendberg, 2004, p. 10). This genre combines the everyday and the imaginary, lives and dreams, interpreting the city as much as envisioning it. Quoting Stephen David Ross, we can say that cities and films "are sites at which human being realizes itself, in the inexhaustible ways in which such realization is possible" (1991, p. 30).

Spaces in American noir are not mere backgrounds, but structural elements with cultural implications. Different artistic ideas and forms conflate in these films. In tracing these antecedents, Jon Tuska identifies Greek tragedy in literature and German Expressionism in cinema as influences. Like them, noir responded to cultural needs and had social consequences, attacking "the very basis for smugness and optimism which had infested the ideologies of so many American films prior to its advent" (1984, p. 239). Tuska supports this statement with a brief

examination of the effects of women's liberation from traditional roles depicted in the films. From this perspective, there is no wonder that the cultural needs and social consequences of these films depend largely on their capacity to place human drama in both the urban and the domestic realms.

Territory and Dispersion

The noir territory is a multiple overlapping images of US history that began with the development and aggregation of seized populated areas and occupied unpopulated areas. This merger produced a centrifugal space, decentralised through growth schemes, interstate highways, traffic planning and mass media communication. It is a territory that can perhaps only be made tangible through the force of speed. Edward Dimendberg evokes the opening of *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944) as an example of a scene that connects speed with urgency and disorder: the fast appearance of a car crossing the almost silent and empty city streets at night (2004, p. 172). The rapid mobility and "increased movement of characters between different locations" (Dimendberg, 2004, p. 210) seen in many of these films are connected with territorial expansion.

Although noir films are not simply crime pictures, both were profoundly altered by the shift from the centripetal forms of small cities to the centrifugal growth of megacities between the 1940s and 1950s: traditional neighbourhoods, familiar landmarks, and pedestrian pavements were replaced by a connected dispersion. These films portrayed this transition, providing an account of the tension between the residual American culture and urbanism of the 1920s and 1930s and its gradual erasure by the technological innovations and social changes that followed. At the same time, it also showed the dissolution of the new forms of the 1940s and 1950s in the 1960s, since the early stages of the simulacra and spectacles of contemporary postmodern culture are clearly visible in retrospect (Dimendberg, 2004, p. 3).

Touch of Evil (Orson Welles, 1958), a late noir that reflects upon the genre in a postmodern fashion, demonstrates the conscience of the border and its relation to1950s' criminality. Frontiers have often been a structural element in the process of defining the US as a country and organised territory. Neighbourly community and anonymous individuality were often seen as opposites in the age of the spreading city, a striking product of the modern industry. Nevertheless, noir is too heterogeneous to be reduced to a single way of representing this urban tension and, as Frank Krutnik notes, although it "locates the modern city as a threat to the 'American community', it refuses to sanction the small town as a redemptive alternative" (1997, p. 88). In a similar way, *Double Indemnity*

reveals the deterioration of communal and familial values, but refuses "simply to condemn its transgressors" (Krutnik, 1997, p. 94).

There was a tension between the old and the new, or the rural and the urban, in the expansive territory. Emanuel Levy recalls that noir stylistic elements were employed to provide a different vision of the rural world. He writes that "[a] darker, more ambiguous, portraiture of small towns marked the films of the 1940s – despite the fact that the country was at war" (1991, p. 256). The fictional countryside space of *The Postman Rings Twice* (Tay Garnett, 1946), for instance, is an isolated and lonely place near the road. The town appears only as a nebulous landscape for encounters. Although Levy does not articulate such a conclusion, it is clear that this way of portraying the rural world made it similar to an urban setting within the bounds of the noir imagery. Until the late 1950s, when the small town/big city dichotomy became less prevalent, small towns tended to be portrayed favourably (Levy, 1991, p. 252). In *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947), the small town is presented as pure and the big city as corrupt; the first cleanses the criminals, while the second depraves the chaste. Small towns had "communal pride and concern for moral virtues – marked by a moral centre, or collective conscience, which was often demonstrated in lengthy trial sequences" (Levy, 1991, p. 256).

Dimendberg demonstrates how Hollywood crime pictures were profoundly altered by the shift from "centripetal" forms to "centrifugal" urban growth. The technology and society that emerged from the Second World War slowly gave rise to the simulacra and spectacles of postmodern culture, causing a shift in American culture and urbanism (Dimendberg, 2004, p. 3). The dispersion and connection in the territory were part of a process that included the growth of cities into immense structures, at odds with human scale.

City and Anxiety

The noir city is the new American city. Frank Krutnik calls it "the distinctive imagining of the cultural and psychic topographies of the mid-century American big-city" (1997, p. 100), even though he also observes that not all noir films were interested in this subject. Following thinkers like Walter Benjamin, James Hay remarks that modern cities are "palimpsests, comprised of remnants from earlier landscapes, always susceptible to erasure or brought into different relations with emerging structures – social relations redefined spatially as habitat" (1997, p. 226). This also applies to American cities despite their youth. Like Hay, Dimendberg believes that film has the capacity to project the past and to record its changes: "[t]hreading the city as expression of some underlying myth, theme, or vision has tended to stifle the study of spatiality

in film noir as a historical *content* as significant as its more commonly studied formal and narrative features" (2004, p. 9). Prior buildings and structures, as well as multiple layers of time, are only glimpsed in these films. The space modernised by industrialisation had become more abstract as the urban renewals erased the memory of lost cities, which is why Dimendberg understands noir as fostering the ability to remember. For him, *Killer's Kiss* (Stanley Kubrick, 1955) "exemplifies the proclivity of the centripetal film noir to wrest fragments of the past –a building, a style, a corner of the city– from obscurity and to facilitate awareness of the city's existence in time" (2004, p. 148). Stanley Kubrick's film is exemplary in the way it recovers and revisits deactivated and abandoned industrial areas and storage facilities in New York.

If the city is a mirror of a particular human society, it does not have a stable and definitive order. The limits of its form can be unintelligible, but as Christopher Prendergast points out, it always has some kind of order (1991, p. 195). This undetermined extent originates fragmented experiences. Accordingly, Dimendberg asserts thatnoir narratives reflected the "fragmented spaces and times of the late-modern world" (2004, p. 6). In *Kiss Me Deadly* (Robert Aldrich, 1955), the fragmentation of experience is constructed over various references and partial images. The film ends on a beach, far from the city, yet still haunted by it, as an organism that escapes human control. Prendergast returns to one of the major noir precedents to examine this topic: the detective novel. In this genre, the investigation is "a specific form of knowledge of the urban itself, predicated on the belief that an increasingly heterogeneous and intractable urban reality can be successfully monitored and mastered" (1991, p. 179).

The modernity that Walter Benjamin saw in Paris, as Charles Baudelaire described it, could be seen, for example, in New York in a new guise. Christopher Prendergast summarises the German philosopher's thought, writing that the city is

> an increasingly uncertain and unpredictable perpetual field is a crucial determinant in the emergence of an art geared to an entirely new set of rhythms, an art based on the principles of surprise and 'shock,' disruption and displacement of any assumption of a coherent 'centre' to experience.
>
> (1991, p. 181)

This experience is similar to the noir effects and traits acknowledged by Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton: the spectators' disorientation and sense of malaise with unmotivated action, the moral ambivalence and cynicism of characters and the representation of cruelty and suffering (2002, pp. 5–13). These characteristics reflect the changing reality of the city. Dimendberg's political discussion of *The Naked City* (Jules

Dassin, 1948), for instance, tracks the relation between the aerial military surveillance and the initial shots of that post-war film: "[u]nlike earlier cinematic and literary depictions, for which the appeal of the aerial perspectives over Manhattan was largely picturesque, these post-war representations appear inextricably bound up with social planning and control" (2004, p. 47). A city grows and is kept alive based on the relations and connections it creates and recreates, a configuration and reconfiguration that exceed the strict geographic confinements. This provides the narrative scheme for the portrait of New York in *The Naked City*, drawing attention to a culture of isolation in which the news changes citizens' perceptions. The press and other mass media have the ability "to remake the social world according to the logic of the image constitutes a key facet of the future-directed quality that Sartre attributed to seriality" (Dimendberg, 2004, p. 82).

Since the urban environment results from a collective effort that shapes shifting social relations, we can say that any representation of it is political, showing contradictions and disputes. *Pickup on South Street* (Samuel Fuller, 1953) dives into the opacity of New York City, which can easily hide in everyday life what is seen as evil, in order to visualise the unsettling and ever-present communist threat. As a popular genre, noir affirmed "that capitalism is not a fair game [...], whilst its true aim is to protect the privileges certain members of society enjoy over others" (MacCannel, 1993, p. 283). For Levy, the hierarchy becomes clear, as

> the proletarian and the sub-proletarian areas of American cities are represented as a kind of space where characters are tested, a space of intellectual machismo, functioning for the left much as the African jungle functioned for the right as the habitat for the white hero of a certain type.
>
> (1991, p. 279)

Social problems like racial conflict, poverty, crime, violence, homelessness and unemployment were often used as aesthetically dramatic subjects, even if they were not necessarily accompanied by a politically conscious approach. In this sense, it is worth following Jon Lewis's thought about the dramatisation of urban social life detected by Lewis Mumford with its continuous trade between spectating and acting, connecting the aesthetic and social experiences of an urban habitat with that of a dream or a film (1991, p. 241). For him, such thought is associated with concepts defined by Christian Metz and Guy Debord. The first thinker saw spectatorship as a complex process of identification and imagination, and therefore of the construction of identity and new images and ideas (Metz, 1986). The second understood the scenic organisation of the city as a strategy for domination. That is, the city corresponds to our desires just to control us more powerfully and efficiently

(Debord, 1999). Levy mentions that the city seems more menacing in these films because it is usually shown at night: "Booming with activity and energy during the day, the City's streets are shown to be empty and deserted at night" (1991, p. 253). Perceiving the city and watching a film are experiences in which the subjective is highlighted. In the words of MacCannell, the noir city is a difficult and tiring "space of survival, [it is] not as a place of childhood roots, nor as an idealized place where we once lived and left, nor as a place to which we desire to return" (1993, p. 280). Or as Krutnik puts it: "the noir city is a realm in which all that seamed solid melts into the shadows, and where the traumas and disjunctions experienced by individuals hint at the broader crisis of cultural self-figuration engendered by urban America" (1997, p. 99). Such comments could have been written with a film like *Murder, My Sweet* (Edward Dmytryk, 1944) in mind, with its induced visions and distorted reality, presenting life in Los Angeles as a hallucinatory experience.

Krutnik claims that these films present the "vitality of the noir city as well as its appalling corruption, of its enticements as well as its horrors" (1997, p. 84). Moreover, as Dimendberg contends, the city "seldom appears re-familiarized or re-enchanted, a space of genuinely enhanced freedom and possibility" (2004, p. 13). The city depicted and explored by noir is made up of contrasts and ambiguities, but it is also a very structured system of alienation and exploitation, a sort of icon of human failure and anxiety that promised an even darker future. "Just as the city-mystery registered the dreaded rise of the metropolis, film noir registered its decline, accomplishing a demonization and an estrangement from its landscape in advance of its actual 'abandonment'" (1993, p. 68), wrote Reid and Walker pointing towards the deep reshaping of urban life sponsored by the Housing Act of 1949. Noir films chronicle the changes in the life of the metropolis and of their inhabitants in the context of their surroundings.

Surroundings and Solitude

There are several surroundings within which the characters of these films circulate, live and die. As exemplified by *The Asphalt Jungle* (John Huston, 1950), they are often what Emanuel Levy calls "typical settings" and "low-life locales", "shabby offices of private eyes, sleazy salons, sinister cocktail lounges, third-rate hotels" (1991, p. 253). In a case like *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946), the milieu extends to suburban areas that "have not been deemed newsworthy – despite the fact that over one-third of the population resides in them" (Levy, 1991, p. 256).

We have already seen that the modern city demands a new subjectivity. Ron Lapsley contends that this phenomenon allows the city to reveal intensely individual processes of appropriation (1997, p. 192). Nostalgia for a lost city is precisely a modality of such processes and it is clearly

exemplified when Dimendberg confesses that to watch films, noir is a way to relive "an experience of space and time, an 'image of the city'" (2004, p. 7). The urban theorist Kevin Lynch perceived the "image of the city" as the sense that human beings can make of a city and its parts (1960). Urban places are remembered through signals and links, certain detached forms that can be drawn schematically. This is in tune with the way in which these films can be seen as "a social memory bank that provides a means for the film spectator to remember disappearing urban forms" (Dimendberg, 2004, p. 10).

Krutnik regards the emptiness of noir streets as an image of the public space overwhelmed by private traumas. He acknowledges that this was "vital to the atmosphere of the Hollywood's dark city were intensified by the practice of studio filming; even during the post-war vogue for location shooting, the display of 'authentic' city spaces in urban crime thrillers tended to be combined with the chiaroscuro styling of noir studio productions" (Krutnik, 1997, pp. 91–92). *Crossfire* (Edward Dmytryk, 1947) presents this pattern, for it builds thematic and formal relations between interior and exterior, confinement and liberty, private and public, within the bounds of military institutions, throughout the investigation of an anti-Semitic hate crime.

Joan Copjec analyses *Double Indemnity* to explain that the market where Phylis and Fred meet is a public space that becomes private through cinematic means, in particular through the use of the male protagonist's voice-over (1993, pp. 190–191). As Billy Wilder's film shows, on the one hand, noir can be an examination of the horror of solitude through the fear of social contact and otherness, which is particularly evident in the character of the detective, who usually does not belong and seems to be constantly nowhere. Krutnik observes that "[t]he impact of the American private-eye as a culturally iconized fantasy male derives from his role as a perpetually liminal self who can move freely among the diverse social worlds thrown up by the city, while existing on their margins" (1997, p. 90). On the other hand, noir continually exposes privacy. From their literary origins, detective fictions often explored the idea that locked rooms could and would be penetrated. Copjec reads this possibility of intrusion in a Lacanian fashion –the real always intrudes in the symbolic (1993, p. 177)– but we can examine how the transference between the symbolic of reality and the reality of the symbolic is staged in *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944). Laura, who has apparently been killed, and the large painted portrait of her both capture Detective Mark MacPherson's attention. They compel him to intrude into her apartment and her life, dream about her and disrupt the narrative that has been told about her death.

The detective's efforts, even the police's actions, produce no deep changes in the city, which is why Dean MacCanell concludes that noir "came to function less as criticism of capitalism and the paternal

metaphor and more as an inoculation against them" (1993, p. 283). By aligning with an anti-hero, viewers accepted capitalism while imagining themselves to be opposed to it, because everything is irrevocably set against him from the start, despite his struggle, and in some cases, determination. These films can be seen as records of the city's resistance to human transformation, as if the urban environment had a life of its own that decisively affects the life of its inhabitants. Yet, regardless of their destructive and nasty nature, these are the characters' surroundings and they cannot escape from this environment. Krutnik claims that "instead of dealing directly with the social forces that have made the modern city so 'unlivable', film noir fixates upon the psychic manifestations of such disease" (1997, p. 89). A symptom of this fixation is the refusal of domestication that brings the private detective and the femme fatale closer in their quest for sites and moments to experience and to share their loneliness. Yet, refusing to be domesticated is not the same as rejecting a domestic space, a home.

Homes and Peril

The noir home is frequently a strange private space, violated by the uncertainty of public space – and, as we have seen, the inverse is also true. Richard Dyer claims that common spaces are more usual in these films than domestic ones (1977, p. 19). The filmed homes typically belong to villains and are, therefore, paired with the eccentricity of rooms and objects "iconographically expressed [...] in the style of luxury quite different from the cozy normality of the 'ordinary family home'" (1977, p. 19). The home, like community, becomes a ghostly presence, a slight trace or vestige of a safe place endangered and undermined by modern America (Krutnik, 1997, p. 88). In a sense, domestic spaces are almost absent from noir, if we understand them as households and places of flourishing, that contrast with the overwhelming presence of urban spaces.

For phenomenologist philosopher Gaston Bachelard, the concept of home as a shelter is profoundly rooted in the human unconscious (1964, p. 12). The American home is a porous secluded space for the family as well as a place in which class perceptions and social divisions are negotiated (Thompson, 1998). The importance of a safe and comfortable spot increases when life in public places is aggressive and human beings feel exposed to this hostility. Yet, as Dyer points out, the noir leading character lacks this realm of security and comfort and when "such an atmosphere is evoked at all, it serves to sharpen the depiction of the noir world by being under threat from the latter (*Kiss of Death* [Henry Hathaway, 1947]) or actually destroyed by it (*The Big Heat* [Fritz Lang, 1953])" (1977, p. 19). It is the home as a stable dwelling, whether actual or illusory, that is destroyed time and time again in noir. Bachelard

defines this dwelling as a body constituted by two images: verticality and centrality. In the first image, a house is seen as a vertical being and "[i]t rises upward" (1964, p. 17), like the one in *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946) with its vast staircase, first seen when gambler Johnny Farrell walks into Ballin Mundson's mansion and then has to direct his eyes towards the top of the stairs where the millionaire appears. In the second image, a house is a kind of concentrated being and "[i]t appeals to our consciousness of centrality"(1964, p. 17), as the one in *The Big Heat*, where everything is near and shared by Detective Sergeant Dave Bannion and his wife, when they clean the dishes and tidy up after a family dinner. These vertical and central images make up an order that is often infected by crushing power –*Gilda*– or destroyed by sudden violence –*The Big Heat*– and such infection and destruction emerge as strong subject matters within these films.

Bachelard idealistically explains that the house "gives us, concretely, a variation of the metaphysically summarized situation of man in the world" (1964, p. 28), being that intimacy and immensity are associated in it. Indoors, we are "no longer aware of the storms of the outside universe" (1964, p. 27); radio and television are the outside elements allowed inside. Outside/inside form a division. Television entered the American domestic environment in the mid-1950s. According to Dimendberg, this shattered the opposition inside/outside "by bringing sometimes chaotic and violent images of the external world into the average living room" (1994, p. 243). Noir anticipated this situation by assuming it as a usual premise: homes are represented as detached elements, rarely part of something resembling a neighbourhood.

Conclusions

The purpose of this excursion into American film noir was to study its different spaces in a systematic manner. It has highlighted the Americanness of these films, but it is worth mentioning that the US and noir are both of mixed origin. In Italy and Mexico, for instance, "noir, like the popular cinema in general, has a potential for hybridity or 'crossing over'– a potential enhanced by noir's tendency to create styles out of the mixed racial or national identities in the metropolis" (Naremore, 1998, p. 224). American film noir was also the fruit of the European sensibilities of emigrant filmmakers, such as Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, Robert Siodmak and Otto Preminger (Reid & Walker, 1993, p. 67). Much of the artistic uniqueness and cultural resonance of noir has to do with its spatial dimension, whether more urban or more domestic, not just chronicling aspects of the territory and the city as well as of characters' surroundings and homes, but providing new visions of them.

Neale contends that noir never existed as a single phenomenon: "[t]hat is why no one has been able to define it", he writes, "and why the

contours of the larger noir canon in particular are so imprecise" (2000, pp. 173–174). Perhaps the difficulty of defining it extends to what it portrays. Despite the differences among all these films, they have internal similarities inasmuch as they all depict features and changes in urban and domestic America in the 1940s and 1950s. Nevertheless, the correspondence between noir and reality was never simply synchronous or linear.

James Sanders points out that noir was habitually more interested "on the seedier side of city life: cheap rooming houses, drab launch counters, and anonymous side streets" (2001, p. 391), zones that, in a way, were invented by noir itself. Lower-middle-class streets, hardly ever overcrowded, replaced the clear social concerns about density and congestion present in the 1930s' tenement films. Be that as it may, a menacing enclosure was still present for "noir streets tended to be strangely empty of people: it was the implicit *feeling* of confinement in their built-up and closed-down vistas that seemed so suffocating" (Sanders, 2001, pp. 391–392). Noir social spaces were fields for negotiating unbalances. As MacCannell makes clear, they were "inclusive in ways that correspond to an earlier theoretical ideal of society as promoted in classical sociological texts. Society contained, or made place for, all its members from the highest-born to the lowest, from infancy until death and beyond, for the criminal, the infirm and the insane" (1993, p. 288).

For Hay, film criticism, so close to literary criticism, often forgets the historical and social relations that contextualise the works (1997, p. 214). This contextualisation enriches the understanding of aesthetic elements in noir films. As Hay writes, the work to be done around noir and its places is an "impulse toward a kind of spatial materialism of the site, the concrete location where film is practiced, always in relation to other sites" (1997, p. 213). This relation should not be confused with an attempt to convey the 'realness' of the spaces represented. *Pickup on South Street*, for instance, was actually shot in Los Angeles, not in New York City. Nevertheless, it captures the paranoia that characterised the everyday of the bustling Big Apple. In fact, the films that created the specific ambience recognised as noir were mostly shot in studio, not on location. It is worth quoting Sanders' summary regarding these aspects:

> In retrospect, it is obvious that noir films were capturing not so much the existing urban reality of the early postwar era as an emerging attitude about the city – an incipient claustrophobia felt by many city dwellers as the suburbs began to beckon. Beneath it, too, was a new fear of urban density itself, understandable enough in the aftermath of the strategic bombing campaigns intended to devastate the urban industrial centers of Europe and Japan, culminating in the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Planning was already under way for a network of federal "defense highway" (later known as the Interstate Highway System) that would help quickly disperse the

nation's population to low-density areas, thus offering a less inviting target to potential aggressors. Public agencies and private lenders, meanwhile, were busy skewing their mortgage and housing policies away from anything resembling traditional urban settings in favor of suburban-style communities that not only offered a high degree of social homogeneity but, to put it bluntly, simply didn't have all those dark old buildings and streets.

<div align="right">(2001, p. 392)</div>

The spatial relations recorded and instigated by noir remain to be unveiled in all of their complexity. The territory is dispersed and lacks unity between rural and urban areas. The city is a root of anxiety, where rational actions are confounded with irrational actions. Surroundings stress the characters' solitude and shift ambiguously between private and public spaces. Homes are haunted by human peril with shattered boundaries where inside and outside become volatile. Studying this aspect of American film noir reminds scholars that "[b]y refusing sharp distinctions between figure and ground, content and context, the analysis of spatial relations in the film noir cycle may help redefine it" (Dimendberg, 2004, p. 7) and emphasises the fact that cinema is an expressive manifestation of spatial culture.

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