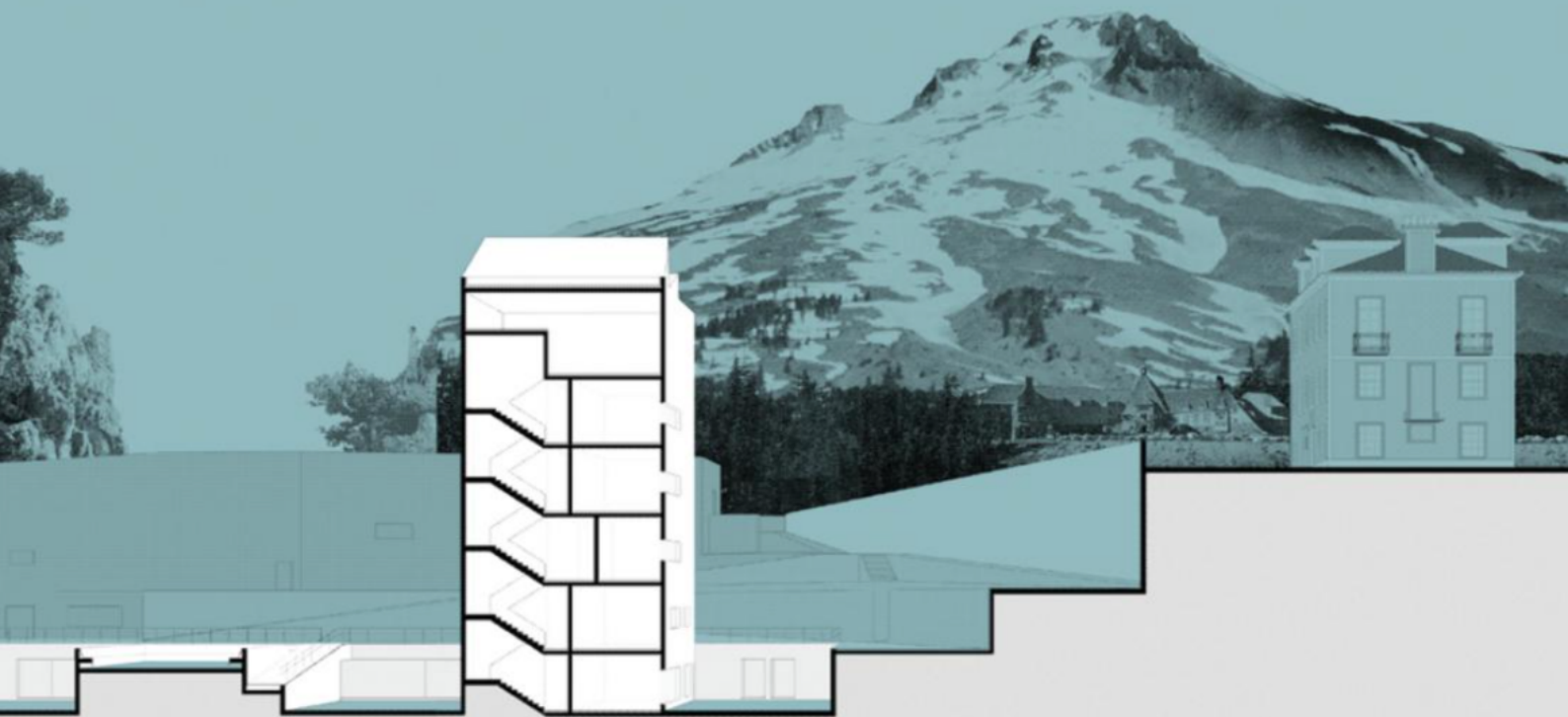


INTER[SECTIONS]

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and restlessness of a nightmare. American *noir* was produced in a period of USA 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, "The classic phase of film noir — from 1944 to 1950 — coincided with a period in which the United States had gained, and its rulers were determined to secure, a 'preponderance of power' in the world" (1993: 88).

1. Territory

What is the *noir* territory? It is a multiple image of USA history that began with the development of seized populated areas and occupied unpopulated areas that were brought together. The result was a centrifugal space, decentralised through growth schemes, interstate highways, traffic planning, and mass media communication. We may say this territory can only be made tangible through the force of speed. Edward Dimenberk evokes the opening of *Double Indemnity* (1944) as an example that connects speed with urgency and disorder (2004: 172): the fast appearance of a car crossing the almost silent and empty streets at night. This rapid mobility leads to the sense of territorial dispersion and "increased movement of characters between different locations" (Dimenberk, 2004: 210) seen in many of these films.

Although *noir* films are not simply crime pictures, both were profoundly altered by the shift from the centripetal forms of small cities to the already mentioned centrifugal growth of megacities between the 1940s and the next decade. Traditional neighbourhoods, familiar landmarks, pedestrian pavements, were substituted by a connected dispersion. In this sense, *noir* portrayed this transition, giving an account of the tension between the residual American culture and urbanism of the 1920s and 30s and its liquidation by the technological innovations and social changes that followed. It also showed the simultaneous dissolution of these new forms of the 1940s and 50s by the society emerging in the 1960s, in which the simulacra and spectacles of contemporary post-modern culture are clearly visible in retrospect (Dimenberk, 2004: 3).

DARKENED SPACES:

The Urban and the Domestic in American Film Noir

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Abstract

Urban and domestic spaces are at the core of the American film noir developed in the 1940s and 50s. The connection between such spaces and noir cannot be considered only as motivational (an association between city and crime) or protective (a separation between home and violence). The context of this genre must be considered more largely as the real as well as the imaginary universe in which its characters live. Studying films such as Double Indemnity (1944) and Gilda (1946) reveals an archaeology of film noir as an account of American spatial culture and simultaneously an imagination of it. This paper analyses the urban and domestic dimensions of these movies by briefly addressing four major topics and their connections: territory, city, habitat, and home. What emerges is a sociology of this cinema through the linking of various times and places with the darkness and restlessness of a nightmare. American noir was produced in a period of USA history governed by fear. The wounds left by the Great Depression were fresh and Communism was seen as a permanent menace.

Keywords: domesticity, film noir, urbanity, USA.

Urban and domestic spaces are at the core of the American *film noir* developed in the 1940s and 50s. The connection between such spaces and *noir* cannot be considered only as motivational (an association between city and crime) or protective (a separation between home and violence). The context of this group of films must be considered more largely as the real as well as the imaginary universe in which its characters live. Studying films such as *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *Gilda* (1946) reveals an archaeology of film noir as an account of American spatial culture and simultaneously an imagination of it. This paper analyses the urban and domestic dimensions of these movies by briefly addressing some aspects of four major topics and their connections: territory, city, habitat, and home. What emerges is a sociology of this cinema through the linking of various times and places with the darkness

2. City

What is the *noir* city? It is usually considered to be the new American city, “the distinctive imagining of the cultural and psychic topographies of the mid-century American big-city” (1997: 100), even though Frank Krutnik notes that not all films were solely 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: 226). This also applies to the American cities despite their youth. Like Hay, Dimenberg believes that film has the capacity to project the past and to record its changes: “Threaded 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: 9). Prior constructions and multiple layers are glimpsed in these films, but even if the city has a centrifugal tendency with an absent centre, “the centripetal film noir requires it for its narrative coherence” (2004: 114). The space modernized by industrialization becomes more abstract as the urban renewals erase the memory of lost cities and Dimenberg understands *noir* as fostering the ability to remember. For him, *Killer's Kiss* (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” (Dimenberg, 2004: 148).

Krutnik claims that these films present “vitality of the *noir* city as well as its appalling corruption, of its enticements as well as its horrors” (1997: 84). Moreover, as Dimenberg contends, the city “seldom appears re-familiarized or re-enchanted, a space of genuinely enhanced freedom and possibility” (Dimenberg, 2004: 13). The city that *noir* depicts and explores is made of contrasts and ambiguities, but it is also a structured system of alienation and exploitation, a sort of icon of human failure, full of anxiety and promising an even darker future. Reid and Walker explain how these films chronicle the life of the metropolis and the people's position towards it as their habitat:

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’ — the violent reshaping of urban life sponsored by the Federal Housing Administration, the Housing Act of 1949. (1993: 68)

3. Habitat

What is the *noir* habitat? There are several surroundings in which the characters of these films circulate, live, and die. As exemplified by *The Asphalt Jungle* (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: 253). In a case like *The Big Sleep* (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” (1991: 256).

Joan Copjec analyses *Double Indemnity* to explain that the market where Phyllis and Fred meet is a public space that becomes private through the use of a cinematic means, in particular the voice-over of the male protagonist (1993: 190-191). Wilder's film shows how *noir* can be an examination of the horror of solitude through the fear of social contact and otherness. This is particularly evident in the character of the detective, who usually does not belong and seems to be perpetually nowhere. Krutnik observes about Philip Marlowe 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: 90). The detective's effort, even the police's action, produces no changes in the city, which is why MacCannell concludes that *noir* “came to function less as criticism of capitalism and the paternal metaphor and more as an inoculation against them” (1993: 283). By aligning with a *noir* anti-hero, viewers accepted capitalism while imagining themselves to be opposed to it, because everything is irrevocably set against him from the start. 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. This environment is these characters' home, their habitat, regardless of its destructive and nasty nature. 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: 89). One symptom of this fixation is the refusal of domestication that brings the private detective and the femme fatale closer in the quest for sites and moments to live out and share their loneliness. Refusing to be domesticated is not the same as rejecting a domestic space.

4. Home

What is the *noir* home? It is often 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 the surroundings in these films tend to be common spaces rather than domestic ones. The homes that are shown are typically of villains and are therefore paired with eccentric and out of the ordinary rooms and objects that “is iconographically expressed [...] in the style of luxury quite different from the cozy normality of the ‘ordinary family home’” (Dyer, 1977: 19).

For philosopher Gaston Bachelard, the concept of home as a shelter is profoundly rooted in the human unconscious (1964: 12). The importance of a safe and comfortable spot increases when life in the streets and 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* [1947]) or actually destroyed by it (*The Big Heat* [1953])” (1977: 19). It is the definition of home as a stable dwelling, whether actual or illusory, that is frequently destroyed by *noir*. Bachelard talks about 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” (Bachelard, 1964: 17) like the one in *Gilda* (1946) with its enormous staircase. In the second image, a house is seen as a concentrated being and “[i]t appeals to our consciousness of centrality” (Bachelard, 1964: 17) like the one in *The Big Heat* where everything is shared and near. These vertical and central images establish an order that is many times ruined by the action, but their rejection or absence can also be a strong subject matter in these films. In *Mildred Pierce* (1945), for example, the contrasts and qualities of the various domestic spaces express the reasons and emotions of the characters, especially of the female protagonist.

5. Spaces Made Dark

The purpose of this excursion into American *film noir* was to find answers to this question: what are its spaces? This study has highlighted the Americanness of these films, but it is worth mentioning that the USA 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: 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 and Walker, 1993: 67). Much of the artistic uniqueness and cultural resonance of *noir* has to do with its spatial dimension, whether urban or domestic, not just chronicling aspects of the city and the territory as well as of the home and the habitat, but also providing new visions of them.

The spatial relations instigated and recorded by *noir* remain to be unveiled in all its complexity. The territory is dispersed and lacks unity, between rural and urban areas. The city arises as unruly, between rational and irrational actions. The habitat is ambiguous and fluctuating, between private and public spaces. The home has shattered boundaries, between inside and outside spheres. These dense connections and persistent tensions darken the spaces and cast a disquieting shadow over them. Studying this aspect of *film noir*, not only calls attention to cinema as a manifestation of spatial culture, but also gives prominence to the fact 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” (Dimenberg, 2004: 7).

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