

Sin Cities

FILM-PHILOSOPHY

Edward Dimendberg (2004)
Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity
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There is possibly no genre that has recently captured the critical eye of both academic scholars and cinephiles more than film noir. While difficult to define, film noir has been an especially rich field for those interested in modernity and its discontents. Edward Dimendberg does not fail to deliver fresh insight. His multidisciplinary study examines the intersection between the spatial and temporal dimensions of noir relying on the keen eye of an experienced film professor coupled with the patient archival research of a social historian.

Dimendberg begins his book not with a definition of genre, but with an explanation of how noir entered his 'awareness'. His feelings evoked by noir are placed in a specific personal context, growing up in New York in the 1960s and watching these older films of the previous postwar decades. According to Dimendberg, the radical rebuilding of New York City and the general postwar transformation of American urban space left him with a sense of loss commensurable with Ernst Bloch's notion of 'the nostalgia for older cultural forms and relations of production experienced by social groups such as the peasantry'. (3)

Whereas Bloch examined this phenomena to understand how the National Socialists in Germany exploited this longing, Dimendberg hopes to recover the layers of competing urban realities he sees embedded in film noir. He wants to do so within 'the encounter between the film noir cycle and built environment of the United States during the period from 1939 to 1959.' (9)

Dimenberg's personal anecdote about his own experience in the built environment of New York of the 1960's provides a wonderful entree for a larger discussion of urban planning (or lack of planning) during the period. However, his own nostalgia for the 'image of the city' maybe not be the 'awareness' of others who lived through this period of 'continued transformation of cities into centers of consumption'. (7) His awareness of change and his feeling of loss are filtered personally by a gap in his own reception of noir from their production decades earlier. Dimendberg asks whether 'special representation[s] in the film noir cycle [were] understood by spectator in the 1940s and 1950s as nostalgic representations?' (19) However, his own admitted reception later begs the question of whether this longing for early urban forms is a nostalgia produced after a decade living in the post-noir city or reflects the social conflict rooted in the postwar city planning. At times Dimendberg seems to conflate our contemporary fascination with the older forms of urban space, which are more relevant to the gentrification of 1980s, with the suburbanization of the 1950s.

However, the attempt to reconfigure film noir as genre based less on structural patterns within the text and more on the various intertextual discourses swirling through the films compensates for some of the confusion over the question of memory. Dimendberg boldly challenges two dominant approaches of film history: formalism and empiricism. He asserts that 'film noir cannot be assimilated comfortably to either the modernist avant-garde or the formal language of postwar film industry.' (17) The reader of *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity* will find very little to satisfy if she is looking for an explanation of how the Paramount decision or the emergence of television impacted film noir and its reception. Instead, Dimendberg's more ambitious project is to write a larger social and cultural history of the United States which runs parallel to the film noir cycle beginning in 1939 and ending of 1959; a neat twenty years period that he marks by the opening of the New York's World's Fair and the completion of Rockefeller Center in 1939 and closes in 1959, the year of Nixon-Khrushchev kitchen debate. (19)

He divides his work into two parts that correspond with the two competing modernist impulses to concentrate and decentralize, describing the first as 'centripetal space', associated with the early part of the noir cycle with films set largely in New York,

and 'centrifugal space', associated with films set amongst highways and suburbs. His discussion of centripetal space centers on his analysis of the representation of urban space in *The Naked City* (Jules Dassin, 1948) and the photojournalistic style of Weegee. What Dassin's film and others of the genre that also represent naked cities share is not so much the grittiness of the street but the depictions of the alienated crowd. Dimendberg, citing Georg Simmel, argues that 'the modern city entails learning to ignore other people and developing a calculated indifference to the bodies with which one shares public transportation and the street.'⁽²²⁾ To negotiate urban spaces successfully, the modern city dweller must have 'an eagle eye' in order to identify opportunity or trouble in the faces of the crowd. The noir hero, according to Dimendberg, must have a sharp eye as well as a nimble mind, to know when to strike a pose of indifference and went to press ahead.

Just at this modern moment, when the individual melts into the mass, there is also an increasing surveillance associated with the modern city. Citing the familiar 'Hausmannization' of Paris as an example, Dimendberg claims that the 'visual technologies' of the 19th century were first employed to detect wrong-doings. By the twentieth-century, the camera functioned to increase this panopticon for surveillance. Film noir, according to Dimendberg, captures this paradox of the loss of communal bonds between individuals and the expanded regulation of each individual. He claims that 'the film noir cycle is in an incessant struggle between the perceptual indifference and engaged cognition, forgetfulness and remembrance, that confirms the understandings of metropolitan experience advanced by Simmel and Benjamin'.⁽³¹⁾ For instance, a character like Jack Marlow from Richard Siomak's *Phantom Lady* (1944) may complain about the 'noise, dirt, and the people' of the city, but he also craves the darkness of the old city streets as 'urban spaces impervious to the gaze of surveillance'.⁽³⁵⁻³⁶⁾ Surveillance in the centripetal city is also present far above the city streets captured in film noir. Dimendberg also argues that aerial photography made popular due to military necessity during World War II has reconfigured the relationship of the individual to the city and redefined the visual regime of urban representation. Here, Dimendberg moves into a discussion of photography beginning with the War Department use of the reconnaissance camera in support of aerial bombing campaigns in Europe and the Pacific. In the post Hiroshima world, aerial photography does not belong in the 'tradition of pictorial landscape' but harbors a menacing power since now in Paul Virilio's words, 'the ability to see becomes synonymous with the ability to destroy'.⁽³⁸⁾ For Dimendberg, the opening aerial shots of New York in *Naked City* are perceived as positive evidence of the survival of the city after

the war, unlike the visual evidence offered the public in the wake of the firebombing of Dresden or the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Dimendberg provides a chilling reminder of the vulnerable of New York City in the photographic age. Eerily prescient in our own post 9/11 era, E.B. White described the new postwar world in his *Here Is New York* (1949):

The subtlest change in New York is something that people don't speak much about but that is in everyone's mind. The city, for the first time in its long history, is destructible. A single flight of planes no bigger than a wedge of geese can quickly end this island fantasy, burn the towers, crumble the bridges, turn the underground passages into lethal chambers, cremate the millions. The intimation of mortality is part of New York now: in the sound of jets overhead, in the black headlines of the latest edition. All dwellers in cities must live with the stubborn fact of annihilation; in New York the fact is somewhat more concentrated because of the concentration of the city itself, and because, of all the targets, New York has a certain clear priority.

Certainly, White's words echo with a greater poignancy today and instill a feeling of anxiety that may, indeed, be even greater than during the Cold War. While Americans in the past fifty or so years may have learned to live with atomic weapons and ICBMs, no Soviet bomber was ever so bold to attempt what a handful of terrorist accomplished on 9/11. All aerial photography of New York skylines are now marked by the absence of the Twin Towers, provoking an even greater sense of vulnerability than at the height of the Cold War.

Dimendberg's insights into the transformation of the urban psyche due to technological innovations of the time illuminate his chapters on centripetal cities. With their collective safety now in question, cities 'typified by New York' were no longer seen as the embodiment of American progress. Dimendberg is right that the utopianism represented by the 1939 World's Fair and the completion of Rockefeller Center seemed in less than a decade to be quaint, naïve dreams of a more innocent time. Instead of a shiny city that can be conceived as an organic whole, the 'truth' of the city lies naked in the darkness of the alleys and decaying neighborhoods or what Dimendberg describes as 'Weegee's city' (54).

While I found Dimendberg's assertions about the new sense of urban vulnerability read through aerial photography and film noir provocative, his attempt to compare the photographer's Weegee's interest in his urban subject to the 'male gaze' described by Laura Mulvey seems overdetermined. Weegee's curiosity and his dogged pursuit of his

photo subjects in his collection also titled *Naked City* (1945) may be voyeuristic, but they don't really fit into the character of fetish object in the sense Mulvey used the term or Dimendberg himself explains. The photograph of crime scenes of course do not create a fetish object more 'reassuring rather than dangerous' (54). In the context of the urban decay of the 1950s, Weegee's photographs could be just as easily understood as a confirmation of the urban fears that will help lead to a flight out of the centripetal city to the safety of the suburbs.

For all its contribution to the field of film studies, Mulvey's notion of the gaze has always seemed to defy historical analysis despite her attempts to historicize it. Dimendberg runs up with the same problem. The intentionality of Weegee's gaze may indeed be controlling his 'feminized' subjects, though I'm not convinced it is any more so than other urban photographers. More important to Dimendberg's own argument is the sense of Weegee's 'noiring' of the visual vocabulary of postwar urbanism. Weegee captures in noir fashion the potential combustibility of the hard urban exterior. This impulse is well illustrated by the example Dimendberg provides of Weegee's photographs of an explosion in Chinatown. Two photographs are juxtaposed; one showing an ordinary scene the street corner of Pell and Mott Streets and another from the same corner taken a moment later depicts a gas main on fire. In contrast to the examples of aerial photography, the Weegee photographs are all taken at night therefore imprinting his presence in the flash of his camera. Rather than a controlling gaze, Weegee's photos powerfully present serial moments of dynamic change, unlike the aerial footage that presents a monumental city frozen in time.

Dimendberg compares the centripetal noir city, New York, to the 'centrifugal' noir city, Los Angeles. His basic premise that the film noir cycle moves from the viewpoint provided by pedestrians to the view through a car windshield can be disputed. Also, there are quibbling points regarding chronology and, at times, too neat a distinction between New York and Los Angeles. Dimendberg acknowledges that 'both Los Angeles and New York were marked by the clash between an earlier centripetal trend had emerged in the early nineteenth century and the accelerating challenge of centrifugal modalities' (171). The results of these centrifugal forces look very different in Los Angeles, a city that was always, even in the time of the storied red-cars, a sprawling regional metropolis rather than a city like New York with a more traditional modern urban configuration.

In terms of chronology, Dimendberg claims that the film noir cycle ends in 1959 with 'end of the metropolis of classic modernity.' (255) However, the urban anxieties he described early in his book certainly are not resolved after 1960, if anything the struggles

over urban renewal, white flight and bussing are the background for a series of urban films in the 1970s that would fit into the Dimendberg's sense of noir. Some of the titles worth mentioning are *The French Connection* (1971), *Shaft* (1971), *Across 110th Street* (1972) and *Serpico* (1973). One deficiency of his arguments regarding the relationship of film noir to urban space is the lack of consideration of issues of race, which certainly played an enormous role in the growth of the suburbs and the neglect of the American cities. Nonetheless, Dimendberg has provided not only an excellent history of the postwar cycle of noir films, but a model for interdisciplinary film studies. Film students, historians, sociologists, and urban planner would all be wise to take a lesson from Dimendberg's approach.