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Spaces of Modernity in Double Indemnity

Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944) is set in Los Angeles in 1938. As Edward Dimendberg points out in *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*, the city is only shown four times in the entire film but is nevertheless a key element of *Double Indemnity*.

In his book, Dimendberg argues that the presence of urban spaces in film noir is a result of a changing American society in the 1940s and 1950s, in which cities, as they had been known in the 1920s and 1930s, no longer existed. Dimendberg writes that noir's depictions of urban spaces "can be unpacked to reveal latent social anxieties and aspirations that connect film noir ... with the rapid technological changes of the twentieth century," and thus "by articulating a 'space of representation,' film noir simultaneously registers and inflects the psychic and cultural manifestations of late modernity" (Dimendberg 12-13).

In the context of Dimendberg, *Double Indemnity* offers a view of urban life that is far ahead of its contemporaries, taking into account not only the technological and societal changes that would occur in the years after World War II, but -- through the absence of visual representation of the city -- the urban sprawl that took place in the postwar period, or to use Dimendberg's terms, the growing centrifugal (or moving away from a center) space of cities.

In this analysis I will look at how *Double Indemnity*'s "spaces of modernity" represent the changing postwar society, concentrating on how the absence of the city and the presence of the automobile and other private spaces illustrate Dimendberg's assertions that film noir expresses "nostalgia and longing for older urban forms combined with a fear of new alienating urban realities" (Dimendberg 7).

The Lonely Crowd – private spaces within *Double Indemnity*

In his book, Dimendberg argues that the urban spaces depicted by films noir can be categorized as either centripetal or centrifugal, or as moving toward a center or moving away from a center. He explains them as such:

If centripetal space is characterized by a fascination with urban density and the visible – the skyline, monuments, recognizable public spaces and inner-city neighborhoods – its centrifugal variant can be located in a shift toward immateriality, invisibility and speed. Separation replaces concentration, distance supplants proximity, and the highway and the automobile supersede the street and the pedestrian. Where centripetality facilitates escape or evasion by facilitating invisibility in an urban crowd, centrifugality offers the tactical advantages of speed and superior knowledge of territory. (Dimendberg 178)

Double Indemnity is undoubtedly a film that displays centrifugal space, however as Dimendberg writes, there is often interplay between the two. “Centrifugal spaces should not be construed as incompatible with centripetal space, for many elements of the built environment reveal both,” writes Dimendberg. “A shopping center with a pedestrian mall located on the outskirts of a city is one example of a centering activity brought to the edge of a metropolis” (Dimendberg 177). In “Out of the Past, Into the Supermarket: Consuming Film Noir” (2006), Erik Dussere addresses the shopping center directly. He introduces the idea of the “lonely crowd” as a key aspect of the American postwar experience (Dussere 21).

Dussere focuses on the supermarket, which is featured in *Double Indemnity*, but this idea of private space within a concentrated area can be seen in other scenes from the film.

The protagonist Walter Neff exists almost completely in private spaces within the city. At the Pacific All-Risk Insurance Company, he darts between Keyes' office and his own, never leaving the second floor for the busy office below. Similarly, he drives back and forth between his own apartment and the Dietrichson home, shown only in enclosed spaces, rarely in open or communal spaces. In "No Way Out: Existential Motifs in the Film Noir" (1976), Robert G. Porfirio writes of the sanctuary that the existential hero escapes to as a way to create some kind of order in a chaotic world. The "Spartan office or apartment" that Porfirio describes is quite visible in *Double Indemnity*, however Neff has taken this idea further, employing his car so that he can isolate himself almost everywhere he goes (Porfirio 93). The need for seclusion is also expressed by Phyllis Dietrichson when she comments on Neff's apartment: "Sounds wonderful. Just strangers beside you. You don't know them and you don't hate them."

But despite Neff and Phyllis' apparent preference for private spaces, the mise-en-scene of the film suggests the more negative aspects of the spaces. Dimendberg writes that noir's spatial representations reflect a lack of comfort and security anywhere: "these post-1939 mutations in the built environment of the American city...produce a sense of being in exile at home" (Dimendberg 10). This can be seen in almost every scene of the private spaces. Venetian blinds in both Neff's apartment, Keyes' office and the Dietrichson home create a prison bar-like pattern on the interiors. This is especially noticeable when Neff makes his last visit to Keyes' office. Neff's apartment has heavy drawn drapes, despite the film's taking place in the summer, and the small windows of his car also create a somewhat claustrophobic effect, begging the question of whether these spaces seclude or trap the individuals within them. Despite Neff's ability to not have to come into contact with any of his neighbors, he is nevertheless forced into hiding by their potential presence. These images reflect Porfirio's description of the confined spaces the noir

hero inhabits: “diagonal and horizontal lines ‘pierced’ his body; small, enclosed spaces (a detective’s office, a lonely apartment, a hoodlum’s hotel bedroom), well modulated with some sort of ‘bar’ motif (prison bars, shadows, bed posts and other furniture), visually enclosed his entrapment” (Porfirio 85). Dimendberg suggests that these smothering spaces are not just a trope of film noir, but an aspect of centripetal space. He writes that centripetal space reveals the following aspects of urban anxiety: “the agoraphobic sensation of being overwhelmed by space, fears of constriction, or the fear of losing one’s way in the metropolis” (Dimendberg 172).

While the “lonely crowd,” or sense of isolation, is obvious in the centripetal spaces of the city, such as offices and apartments, it can also be seen in centrifugal spaces, such as the supermarket. In his essay, Dussere uses the supermarket scenes of *Double Indemnity* to illustrate the idea of a “lonely crowd.” Linking the importance of consumerism to the postwar era, Dussere writes that the supermarket “marked a movement away from urban centers toward a suburban, car-oriented lifestyle” echoing Dimendberg’s description of an isolated existence in an ever-sprawling space (Dussere 19). Because of the lack of communal space in suburban areas, Dussere explains that the the suburban supermarket emerged as a “new kind of social space organized around consumption and commodity fetishism” (Dussere 21).

In the two scenes of *Double Indemnity* that take place at Jerry’s Market, the lonely crowd is evident. Neff and Phyllis meet in the suburban supermarket to first plan the murder of Phyllis’ husband and, secondly, to discuss the murder afterwards. Despite being a public place, the supermarket provides a sort of invisibility for Neff and Phyllis: everyone there is in their own “private space” and ignores the two, despite Phyllis’ conspicuous “disguise” and their obvious attempts to not be seen together. This echoes Dimendberg’s description of centripetal space, which “facilitates escape or evasion by facilitating invisibility in an urban crowd” (Dimendberg

178). Dussere adds to this idea, “the supermarket continues to intrude on their conversation, in the form of passing shoppers and store employees – none of whom pays any attention to their frantic whispering” (Dussere 20). He continues:

The space of Jerry’s Market is ostensibly communal, but in fact the scene as filmed emphasizes the privatization and commercial purpose of the space, focusing our attention on barriers and awkward silences in order to suggest a ‘lonely crowd’ of people lost in private reverie and communing only with their potential purchases” (Dussere 21).

Both Dussere and Dimendberg note the connection between urban sprawl and the rise of consumer culture in the postwar era. This loss of communal space and rise of consumer culture is seen even further in regard to the automobile.

Automobility and centrifugal space

The most prevalent private space in *Double Indemnity*, and the one that best represents the idea of centrifugal space, is the automobile. The urban anxieties that Dimendberg asserts are represented by centrifugal space – anxieties that “hinge upon temporality and the uncertainty produced by a spatial environment increasingly devoid of landmarks and centers and often likely to seem permanently in motion” (Dimendberg 171-2) – are directly linked to issues of mobility and transportation.

The first way the automobile reflects the changing urban landscape of the 1940s is in the way it alienates the driver. In “Noir’s Cars: Automobility and Amoral Space in American Film Noir” (2008), Mark Osteen writes, “it is no accident that so many films noir take place in Los Angeles, as the city’s design – a centerless string of suburbs – engendered a sense of isolation

and loneliness” (Osteen 184). Osteen writes that this sense of isolation extends to the cars, which reflect postwar America’s isolationist mindset.

This is clearly seen in *Double Indemnity* through Neff’s car. He drives nearly everywhere and even parks the car in an underground garage where he has to make contact with only the mechanic. After learning of Phyllis’ intentions for her husband, Neff is so upset he needs a drink but rather than going to a bar he gets a beer at a drive-in restaurant where he doesn’t even have to get out of the car.

Perhaps more important than its purpose as a private space (in the context of Dimendberg), is the experience of the city provided by the automobile. Dimendberg writes, “Though appearing early in the film noir cycle, *Double Indemnity* portends the growing sway of centrifugal space through the relative absence of the city, as well as the significance of the automobile as the modality through which the now-diffused metropolis is primarily encountered” (Dimendberg 173). Neff’s experience of the city is mediated for the viewer through his car, offering what Dimendberg refers to as “the perceptual modality of the automobile” (Dimendberg 168). The key aspect of this new experience of urban spaces, according to Dimendberg, is speed. He writes, “more than simply a product of suburbanization and decentralization, centrifugal spatiality reconfigures bodily experience and valorizes speed” (Dimendberg 169). Dimendberg explains that this changes the viewing of a city. Whereas a pedestrian can choose from a variety of stimuli, a driver sees only what he or she needs to see to reach his or her destination. The driver sees only the route and sees it for its functionality. This idea of a single route is illustrated in *Double Indemnity* as the plan that Neff and Phyllis enact: “straight down the line”

Linked to speed, mobility is an important theme in *Double Indemnity*, and transportation is used symbolically to represent Neff's attitude toward fate. Ken Hillis' "Film noir and the American Dream: the dark side of enlightenment" (2005) addresses Neff's "sense of circular fate," but it is Dimendberg who makes the connection between fate and automobility (Hillis 8). Keyes' train metaphor for murder, Neff's description of the murder plot ("the machinery had started to move and nothing could stop it.") and the involvement of the train in the murder plot all lend themselves to an idea of fate as a sort of ride that cannot be stopped. However, as the film progresses and Neff attempts to disentangle himself from Phyllis, a theme of automobility – which, Osteen points out, is the combination of autonomy and mobility – emerges.

I will return to the first scene of the film, which most clearly illustrates this idea, but will first look at scenes that chronologically lead up to it. It has already been established that Neff drives nearly everywhere and usually by himself. After tricking Mr. Dietrichson into signing the accident insurance papers, Lola hides in Neff's car and asks for a ride. Her presence in the car – Neff's "sanctuary" – causes him to doubt the plan that he has just described as unstoppable. During the murder scene, which can be seen as sealing Neff's fate, Phyllis is in the driver's seat (literally and figuratively, as Osteen notes) while Neff remains in the backseat, despite performing the actual murder. The murder is made to look like it took place on a train, which, as Dimendberg notes, possesses "visibility and a fixed itinerary" (Dimendberg 201). In order to pull off the murder, Neff and Phyllis need to be able to rely on the train's timing and also need to have "Mr. Dietrichson" be seen getting on the train. However, as soon as the body is placed on the tracks, the two rely upon Phyllis' car to leave. The car provides invisibility and allows them to embark in any direction they choose. However, the mechanization of the train and the unreliability of automobiles is soon experienced by Neff and Phyllis when the car won't start.

Dimendberg describes these “dangers of mechanical breakdown” as one setback to the independence automobiles offer (Dimendberg 198). “While evoking spatial dispersion, freedom and mobility, this emphasis on the car also underscores characters’ dependence on technology,” he writes (Dimendberg 173).

A scene just after the murder continues to illustrate this dependence on technology. Neff walks to a drugstore and claims that he cannot hear his own footsteps. “It was the walk of a dead man,” he narrates. His car and his autonomy stripped away from him, Neff has no identity, no control, and no protection from the outside world. In light of Hillis’ assertion that “the postwar period has witnessed the emergence of an economic model connecting identity with consumption,” then Neff indeed can be seen as nothing without his car, stripped of his identity and his autonomy through his plan with Phyllis (Hillis 9). This is the only time Neff is shown walking in the city and the only time he experiences it without the speed and perspective of the car. Dimendberg writes that the Los Angeles of film noir is an “abstract centrifugal space organized around the automobile and its uniquely mobilized gaze, no longer tied to the body of the pedestrian and the space of the street” (Dimendberg 222). This scene illustrates just how bizarre it is for Neff to experience the city in this old-fashioned way.

The theme of mobility accelerates as the film nears its end and Neff attempts to defy fate. Just before killing Phyllis, he tells her, “I’m getting off the trolley car, right at this corner...I got another guy to finish the ride for me.” Chronologically, then, the first scene of the film happens. Neff drives recklessly in his car, almost running over workers from the Los Angeles Railway Corporation Maintenance Department – an obvious statement of his feelings toward public transportation and what it represents for the individual. He then speeds through a stoplight and swerves around another car, as if defying the film’s recurring phrase, “straight down the line.” It

is clear that Neff is showing he is in control. This last scene can be seen as symbolizing Neff's attempt at defying fate, but, as suggested by Dimendberg and Osteen, also depicts the ever more centrifugal space of cities in the postwar era. Dimendberg does not concern himself with the symbolic importance this scene holds for the film, but reads it as it relates to his subject of urban space and experience:

Los Angeles residents perhaps recognized a kindred spirit in Neff and his near attack upon the trolley infrastructure, if not his running of a red light in the following scene. *Double Indemnity* juxtaposes this older public-transportation technology with the automobile and proposes the speed of the automotive travel as the fundamental experience of passage through the city” (Dimendberg 173).

Through its portrayal of “spaces of modernity,” *Double Indemnity* illustrates clearly Dimendberg's thesis. By portraying secluded living spaces and changing forms of urban mobility, *Double Indemnity* illustrates the relationship the changing geography of cities had to the greater themes of isolation, existentialism and identity that emerged in the 1940s and 1950s.

Dimendberg writes, “the most striking feature of centrifugal space remains its frequently *nonarchitectural* character, its introduction to technologies that facilitate speed and communication into the experience of a built environment once exclusively defined by architecture, urbanism, and landscape” (Dimendberg 178). Concentrating solely on the film noir produced between the 1930s and 1950s (and not taking into account the neo-noir films that would come later), Dimendberg's analysis stops short of the major changes that would come in the field of communication, namely the Internet. Dimendberg looks at how television began to replace the communal spaces of cities; I would be interested in how urban spaces are represented

in the films of neo-noir and what role the advent of this new form of communication plays in the representation.

Works Cited

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