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## Staging Murders: The Social Imaginary, Film, and the City

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In neo-noir films, starting with *Internal Affairs* (d. Mike Figgis, 1990), I see fragments of an L.A. street I know very well dressed up for crime: misrepresented so casually, it becomes a private joke. I have even begun to search, beyond Los Angeles itself, for the *ur-space* where all murder on film "must" take place. In the twenties and thirties, "New York" streets were built at Paramount and Warners Brothers Studios, particularly for gangster movies, later, of course, for film noir. Clearly the film facades were modeled on the Lower East Side, Hell's Kitchen, or Little Italy, based on photos of Mulberry Street, or streets closer the Manhattan Bridge--a condensation of immigrant neighborhoods in southern Manhattan. Many in the film industry at the time knew these neighborhoods, having grown up there. Decades later, *Godfather II* recreated Mulberry Street circa 1910, and *Mean Streets* was shot "presumably" in the neighborhood of Little Italy. In fact, *Mean Streets* was shot mostly in Los Angeles. However, the cinematic map of New York--never to be confused with real streets--was already well established by the early seventies. New York and L.A. had merged in strange ways.

Gradually, these faux streets take on a social imaginary of their own, in varying mutations over the past fifty years, decade by decade, country by country. During the forties, as Hollywood films steadily moved "on location," but were shot on the lot as well, streets in Los Angeles had to be found that matched New York streets. Similarly, which streets in Paris did Godard feel matched **[End Page 85]** his paradoxical memory of American cities, based on film noir, to be then transmuted so ironically in *Breathless*? Or which locations in seventies Germany served Wenders as sites for *The American Friend*?

What, at last, are the urban "requirements" for a location where a murder should take place--the alleys, the placement of buildings? Film scholarship certainly has shown us how high-contrast lighting and camera positions produce that anxious moment when

murder is possible, the alienated space where no neighborhood can survive, where no friends can be trusted, where all crooks are in business, and where all businessmen are crooks. But what is the code for film locations? Streets have to be staged in a very structured way when murder is involved.

Like Dante's *Inferno*, spiraling downward one ring at a time, each ring takes you deeper, and farther from any hope of escape. The outer ring is the gangster world (I am reminded especially of setups in films and crime literature from the twenties and thirties). The next ring is the world of the detective: the last white pathfinder in the cesspool of urban nihilism (as in thirties and forties literature and film, ending with *The Maltese Falcon*). Further down lies the ring inhabited by the killer, filled with unreliable narratives, perverse voice-overs, and distortions (film noir, of course). And finally, the ring of the victim, generally shot like an Expressionist horror film--very fractured, even more distorted (consider *Sudden Fear*, dir. David Miller, 1952).

Ideally, a street location should allow for all four "rings"--simultaneously if needed, but certainly in sequence. The life shown on the street should feel utterly alienated, as if no community could survive there, except to plan, commit, or support a crime. For accent, there should be a rotted cafe or a dumpy grocery store where the crooks are in business. As for residential housing, apartment buildings should suffice, and they ought to have a dark, empty hallway--a place where neighbors fail to hear the lingering death squall while someone is being murdered on the fourth floor. For long shots, the street should have uneven, extreme angles between the buildings--for hidden intentions--where a crook can hide before mugging his victim. **[End Page 86]**



As social critics, perhaps we ought to "blame" Jeffersonian America for all this nihilism, for the American distrust of the city, and for our worship of small towns, associated with Jefferson's preoccupations. And then, we should condemn the cognate of this nihilism: the American obsession with urban decay. In other words, this cinematic image of the decayed city is in keeping with treacherous news coverage of boozing and whoring in Irish Manhattan in the 1840s, with Dickens's complaints about New York, with Kipling's dire vision of Chicago, and certainly with Dore's gothic wood engravings of 1872 London. By the 1850's, newspapers presented urban crime with the sensibility of armchair tourism--picturesque views of the labyrinths of poverty, a tourism based on vicarious "slumming." The urban poor were framed inside tenements much **[End Page 87]** the way, in conventional paintings, Spanish gypsies were framed beside Moorish walls. And then, along with the picturesque, a bit of moralizing is added, perhaps something from the Temperance Movement, or nativist fears of Irish, Sicilians, or Jews--and always fear of Africans; and in Los Angeles, always fear of Mexicans.

It is simple enough to summarize this scenario: a good crime scene identifies poverty as local color for murder, with all the racist baggage that implies. And this anti-urbanism, and exoticized urbanism, can be traced to the birth of the republic. However, my time frame is much more modest. I have noticed, for example, that noir descriptions of Los Angeles in the forties resembled the grisly exaggeration in urban planning documents of the same period: poor neighborhoods breed hopeless blight. This led, therefore, to urban planning of the fifties, and is unmistakably a kind of noir--master-planning as anti-noir, a

corrective designed to remove the unsanitary remnants of the Great Depression, of the pre-war world too blighted for "good" families, only suitable for murder.

This visual imagery of the inner city has, of course, comforted many viewers, by reinforcing a Victorian panic about ethnicity and class. It also has reinforced illusions about where crime-ridden cities end and safe suburbs begin. For example, in Los Angeles, slums in the "suburbs" are rampant. Various cities within the San Fernando Valley have gone to seed much the way urban centers did in the forties. But there is essentially no film vocabulary to record ironies of *matured* suburbanism, except by visually comparing it to the hopeless descent into hell that is the architectonic heritage of film noir--noir as part of racist, anti-urban politics since the forties.

I have a student who is Thai-Chinese, who ran with a gang in Pacoima (in the San Fernando Valley) that was Mexican, Thai, Chinese, and Russian. However, Pacoima is not an inner city. It is essentially old ranching country, very rustic, with winding trails--almost like the backdrop to a Jim Thompson novel, but using five languages, and with extremely intact neighborhoods, that are not simply overrun by gangster warlords. This student has produced a number of magical realist diaries of Pacoima, about the gentle absurdities of life there. His tales read more like Steinbeck in the thirties, infected by Marquez; they **[End Page 88]** are certainly about gang violence, but are also modified by Confucianism--definitely not another descent into film noir.

Much as I adore every noir film that I can see--and see again--they remain delusional journeys into panic and conservative white flight. Very little of the totality of urban experience can enter a cinematic noir location, perhaps only twenty minutes out of a day, usually the ten minutes before and after a murder. And as local color, the noir location specializes in people who knew the corpse, and have lost all hope. Thus, by extension, noir also helps sell gated communities, and "friendly" surveillance systems.

In 1993, I unwittingly became part of a noir TV ad for shopping malls. I was interviewed, for sweeps week, as part of a special on Citywalk--an L.A.-themed pedestrian mall at Universal Studios that encapsulates sanitized highlights of the city. I tried to limit my commentary to sound bites of thirty seconds, preferably fifteen. I thought that would keep my statements in context. But afterwards, the editor took over.

On the special, a gorgeous, leggy female newscaster opened by asking "Is Citywalk a new hope for public life in Los Angeles?" The show jumpcut past a sexy montage of Citywalk (provided by MCA, the parent company of Universal Studios): restaurants, movies, people of all races laughing. "Or," she went on, "is Citywalk merely an escape from the city?" followed by a gloomy long shot of a corpse being lifted into an ambulance. Then I was brought on for my meager thirty seconds, to reinforce this ludicrous contrast. So what options were being implied here? Should a couple out for a night on the town see if there is a good pasta place near the murder scene? Or just drive to Citywalk, and avoid being shot at (although a recent murder in the parking lot and gang fights belie the supposed safety to the place)?

Noir may indeed have begun as social critique during the twenties (even that is up to question), but in the nineties, it has just the right tropes for promoting shopping malls.

Noir has become even more purely a variation of tourism; it belongs more at an Urban Outfitters than on a city street. **[End Page 89]**



News broadcasting relies on noir glamour as well, almost self-reflexively. In February 1996, two men in body armor tried to rob a Bank of America in North Hollywood, then engaged in a blistering shootout with dozens of cops. Finally, one of the men committed suicide, while the other was allowed to bleed to death. To audiences in Los Angeles, this "robocop" robbery looked very uncanny (and was much discussed on talk radio, and in the papers). The news helicopters shot the scene as if it were a movie. They managed to keep light off the crime scene. They zoomed in so easily that the shootout looked literally like the downtown shootout in *Heat* (d. Michael Mann, 1995).

The movie version and the real event took place simultaneously. Noir camera angles have become second nature in the broadcast industry, while movie crimes are shot often with handheld cameras to copy the news. There is an urban legend that one of the crooks in the Bank of America shootout used to religiously watch the final shootout in *Heat*. For weeks after the shootout, video rentals for *Heat* zoomed. What's more, for days afterward, the crime scene itself became a **[End Page 90]** major tourist spot (even more than O. J.'s house in Brentwood, if only for a weekend). Literally hundreds of scavengers rummaged for objects, particularly for bits of money that had been blown into confetti. One policeman was on duty to serve as travel guide--to prevent riots, but also to put the right spin on things.

Of course, since the penny dreadfuls of Victorian England, this obsession with crime as tourism has been very marketable. Noir writers undoubtedly perceived their work as an antidote to this, as stylized psychological inversion into the soul of murder. But certainly in the nineties, even the mass murderer has become a safe marketing construct. I'm waiting for someone to build a noir theme park, a vastly updated wax museum, with immersive effects, perhaps a chance to commit virtual murder. Certainly such gimmicks already exist in video games, on the Internet, and on CD-Rom.

So how do we look critically at crime films that we like? While I admire *L. A. Confidential* (d. Curtis Hanson, 1997), it is an extremely marketed-tested portrait of police in Los Angeles, circa 1997. Since the Rodney King incident in 1991, the LAPD has been routinely portrayed on film as a pack of psychotic buffoons. In their new imaginary, the LAPD officers are venal warlords along the caravan route of gang infested Los Angeles. Indeed, the LAPD has functioned, and to some extent still does, as a reluctant army of occupation in poor neighborhoods. At best, it has a sour, but vaguely improved relationship with the poor. I have learned to assume that all facts require essential fictions when violence and murder are discussed. The simple facts of neighborhood life have to be erased in order to get the facts straight. Thus, noir nonsense never ceases.

So I summarize the matter this way: noir reflects the perversities of consumer panic as a way to hide urban realities. This paradox gives noir its presence and power. Do we in fact think of film as a documentation of American social life, or of American wish fulfillment? One can't have it both ways.

Whenever students ask me what I mean by saying that movies, by definition, will fictionalize any location where they are shot, I answer with a challenge. Go to a supermarket, I explain, and buy a tin of coffee. Check where the coffee was made. Suppose the label says Colombia. Then brew a cup, and sit in **[End Page 91]** a comfortable chair in half light, very meditative and ideal for concentration. Then sip slowly, and try to guess precisely where in Colombia the beans were picked. That process essentially parallels the relationship that movies have to the location where they are shot--a plantation setup along a chain of production in a vast export industry.

The only catch, of course, is that movies watchers, unlike coffee drinkers, often imagine that they have been to Colombia after seeing a film "located" in Columbia: there lies that same paradox--the poignancy of fiction. What indeed have they seen, and more importantly, what have they *not* seen: and what does that erasure suggest for film studies? Certainly, poststructural theory has decimated any unshakable belief in the splendor of movie realism. But that linguistic critique is not really enough, not in an era when fixed-point photography is being replaced by computer manipulation, and where the digital paint box may become the primary source for photo-imaging. We need to address the problematic of imaginaries much more vigorously.

In *Chinatown*, the false Mrs. Mulwray has been killed in a court apartment complex in Echo Park. I spent two weeks searching out that location, which turned out to be around the corner from where I lived at the time, in Angelino Heights, where many films are shot.



However, only a hundred yards away, in December 1991, a young man was murdered in a drive-by shooting. In fact, for almost a year, that one corner directly facing the "Chinatown" court complex was bursting with raw activity. There were very casual curb-to-curb drug sales, gunplay, and petty thievery--sometimes as perverse pranks, such as bullets through neighbors' windows while they were away, and irrepressible graffiti. And yet, despite all the terror that these incidents wrought--forcing out a number of families, terrifying my wife, giving my son gaudy nightmares--there was a strange innocence to it all. The perpetrators were still children. You could see them buying ice cream from the local *paleta* man. I remember chatting, in 1985, with the location scout for *Chinatown*: all he could recall of the site was that it went east-west, a preferred orientation for light and equipment. The actual presence of a highly convoluted mix of poverty, races, and antique houses, as well as bizarre errors in urban planning **[End Page 92]** was beside the point. After that conversation, the "Chinatown" house came to represent for me cruelty beneath absurdity, how little of the subtlety of any of these neighborhoods--in Los Angeles, at least--is allowed to make it to the screen.



I also have studied many other key locations for movie murder in L.A.: two elements seem to repeat. First, there tends to be a consumer monument nearby, such as the facade of the Crossroads of the World building in the background of a dark scene in *L. A. Confidential*; or views of the Hollywood sign--always a favorite, particularly if the original twenties sign, "Hollywoodland," is shown.

And second, crime needs a patina--some alligatored paint, often something wooden and neglected--referring back to the heritage of those Paramount/Warners "New York"

streets (consequently seen in mutated form in cyberpunk films since *Blade Runner* [d. Ridley Scott, 1982]). For example, the warehouse district in eastern downtown Los Angeles was "New York" enough for *Heat*, as **[End Page 93]** well as for a number of crime films that needed such patina. Similarly, areas west of downtown, decimated by bad urban planning, have patina--vacant lots that look like open sores. These empty lots also are cheaper to shoot, and sometimes look very sexy at night, with views of the downtown skyline, or looking west, of the Hollywood sign (back again to those noir Los Angeles consumer monuments). In other words, crime films set in Los Angeles require phantoms, the holes left by lost buildings, suggesting failed schemes, bad faith, loss of hope; such phantoms, along with tourist icons (somewhere, even regularly, in the frame to to cue the viewer) in turn, reinforce even more the false memories of Los Angeles.



And finally, there is the presence of film itself, its *trompe l'oeil*: how it tends to dissolve the depth of a space and its variations in texture, three-dimensional aspects you sense if you walk inside a movie set, for example, but are lost when you see the film version. For example, in 1996, the critic and photographer **[End Page 94]** Allan Sekula walked out of his house near Cedar-Sinai Medical Center to find volcanic ash all around him. Crews were setting up to shoot scenes for *Volcano*. Movie ambulances even got in the way of real ambulances. Mannequins as corpses were left on makeshift gurneys.

Sekula began taking rolls of pictures, and actually had to outrun film crew members who somehow thought he was bad for business. Shot from overhead, the mannequins in his photos are cropped. The absurdity of movie staging is critiqued; this is very much the spirit of Sekula's work--very precise, carefully researched. However, I have asked various viewers of his photographs if they noticed that these "bodies" were mannequins. Most act surprised, even though the photo is cited as a movie set. The camera, even a politicized camera, turns mannequins very easily into corpses. The movie crew who dress a set know this. They know that the crass, ironic, whimsical look of the street, with its raw edges, and its distractions (neighborhoods, real hospitals) can be evened **[End Page 95]** out behind the camera. I am merely pointing out the obvious, that the sheer presence of film erases. This erasure is essential to its power--and its mystique, that which effects *meisters* and auteurs create when they collaborate for a moment of magic.

And, of course, this mystique is also for sale. Increasingly, through restaurants like Planet Hollywood or the Cheesecake Factory, the consumer is invited to eat inside a movie-set ambience. As a gag, one pretends to be behind the scenes, to be in the know. Our culture is filled with behind-the-scenes imagery, what I call pop deconstruction, from stories of Princess Di's bulimia to lawsuits about Clinton's penis. However, this impulse already makes for new market niches, new consumer products placing us inside the hot lights, behind the scenes. We now dine inside Bazinian space as if the camera and the paparazzi were on us. But what of the context around us? Movie cameras only shoot what is diegetically inside the frame. Locations themselves merely suit the apparatus. They are no more relevant on their own than the height of a loading dock at the studio.

Nietzsche once wrote that actors are vampires of their unconscious. Filmmakers, in turn, have to be vampires of the location they shoot. Very rarely--only after heroic research and a very tailored script--can a movie be anything else. Nor should it be. The dramatic

structure of films, along with their relative brevity, require a visual shorthand that is supposed to excise the social context.

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