

---

"Chinatown," Part Four? What Jake Forgets about Downtown

Author(s): Rosalyn Deutsche

Source: *Assemblage*, No. 20, Violence, Space (Apr., 1993), pp. 32-33

Published by: The MIT Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3181686>

Accessed: 13/01/2010 21:00

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=mitpress>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



The MIT Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Assemblage*.

## Chinatown, Part Four? What Jake Forgets about Downtown

Lately, writers have been comparing the texts of critical urban studies with literary or film *noir* and describing urban spatial theorists as *noir* detectives, especially as hard-boiled private eyes. It is hardly surprising that some urban scholars feel an affinity for the tough-guy crime story. Given the centrality of the city as both scene and object of *noir* investigation, the analogy practically suggests itself. As Raymond Chandler wrote in 1934, the “mean” urban settings of early hard-boiled detective novels—by contrast with the genteel environments typical of classic whodunits—attest to the new genre’s realism, bringing out the sociological implications of the theme of murder. “The realist in murder,” Chandler noted, “writes of a world in which gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities...where the mayor of your town may have condoned murder as an instrument of money-making....”<sup>1</sup> What, then, could be more obvious than the resemblance between *noir* detectives unmasking the power of money and critics of the capitalist city? Guided by a sense of geographic competence, they move warily through treacherous urban spaces—landscapes veiled by deceptive appearances, where almost no one speaks the truth—to trace the histories of violence that have unfolded in space and, moreover, in the economic production of space.

The depiction of urban scholars as street-wise sleuths differs from other references to *noir* sprinkled throughout recent urban analysis. Occasionally, for instance, critics have cited *noir* descriptions of cities—like Chandler’s melancholic portrait of Los Angeles’ Bunker Hill as “lost town, shabby town, crook town”—to enliven their own accounts of city neighborhoods and, more importantly, to counteract the optimistic rhetoric surrounding such brutal urban processes as the 1980s redevelopment of downtown L.A. Perhaps, merely by their presence, such quotations implicitly associate urban analysis with the knowing stance of a Philip Marlowe, Chandler’s model private investigator. Only recently, however, has the *noir* detective story been invoked expressly as an image of radical spatial theory’s own activity.

In many respects, the metaphor is a natural. Yet it is only possible to assume that *noir* and urban theory easily share a vision of the city—and that, consequently, hard-boiled private eyes and urban scholars are kindred spirits—by ignoring at least one dissimilarity between the two discourses. Whereas *noir*, notable for its images of women, routinely identifies the dangers of the city with the sexuality of its *femme fatales*, the new urban theory endowed with *noir*’s mantle just as readily detaches space from questions of sexuality and, for that matter, barely mentions women at all. Of course, this difference from *noir* on the level of overt content hardly means that urban analysis is innocent of either gender relations or constructions of sexual difference. The tough guy metaphor itself suggests that urban theory is, rather, one of those cases where it is precisely the absence of a topic that offers us the first clue to its presence. But if in *film noir* the *femme fatale* is conventionally killed off or otherwise punished as the narrative unfolds, in urban theory’s version of the genre, she meets her inevitable demise before the story begins. No matter how transparent it appears, then, the image of urban theorists as *noir* detectives entails—and in this way it is, though unwittingly, *noir*like—some mysterious disappearances that are themselves worthy of investigation.

It may seem fanciful to pursue an inquiry into the likelihood of a relationship between a fictional character and an urban scholar. Taken seriously, however, the conceit may prove more telling than its proponents

suspect. For the trope of *noir* detection, presenting urban discourse as a disinterested search for the hidden truth of the city, also has the capacity to dismantle this claim. The comparison suggests, that is, that the subject of urban spatial discourse (as distinguished from the actual urban theorist) is itself a fiction. For Chandler, the supreme achievement of realistic crime stories was not the reproduction of urban reality but the invention of the hard-boiled detective, the character who, undismayed by violence, embodies what Chandler specified as the genre’s essence—the quality of redemption in a violent world. “Down these mean streets,” Chandler famously wrote, “a man must go who is not himself mean...He is the hero; he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man.”<sup>2</sup> A figure in a landscape, the detective is passionately bound up with, yet independent of, the space of the city. Urban theory’s embrace of this figure invites us to explore, by analogy, the ambivalent relationship between the investigator and his object of scrutiny. How do images of the city, suppressing the evidence of this reciprocity and giving the impression that they simply offer access to the real world, operate to define the “complete man?” With the help of *noir*, we might even begin to connect sexuality with the desexualized spaces of the city as they so often appear in new urban theory.

The geographer, Derek Gregory, has taken a step in this direction in an article fittingly titled “Chinatown, Part Three?”<sup>3</sup> There, Gregory draws the detective-urban theorist comparison satirically to criticize Edward Soja’s recent book, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*. Soja is a leading figure of the neo-Marxist school of urban research located in Los Angeles—quintessential *noir* territory—and Gregory’s opening vignette casts him as a southern California operative bent on solving the dual mysteries of social theory and urban geography. “I begin in this way,” explains Gregory, “because it conveys...what I take to be the essence of *Postmodern Geographies*.”<sup>4</sup> Examining the geography of Soja’s text, Gregory concludes that, by adhering to a belief in the existence of a political-economic foundation unifying social and urban space, Soja, despite his apparent embrace of postmodern “fragmentation,” actually produces an “imaginary totalization” of the city. This replete image of Los Angeles, dependent on the construction of an external vantage point, places the subject of Soja’s representation in the position of the disembodied, controlling look, that is, of the detective. In Gregory’s analysis, the detective represents the idea of the subject who stands outside space as the activity of mastery.

But the title of Gregory’s article is not exclusively parodic. It is also borrowed in tribute from the work of Mike Davis, another important urban theorist, whose earlier article, “Chinatown, Part Two? The ‘Internationalization’ of Downtown Los Angeles,” in turn pays homage to Roman Polanski’s *noir* revival film set in 1920’s L.A.<sup>5</sup> Gregory uses Davis’ essays on L.A. as a counterpoint to *Postmodern Geographies*: like Soja, Davis stresses the political economy of sociospatial restructuring but, unlike Soja, he also attends to the specific struggles and distinctive cultures of Los Angeles’ Third World, conflicts whose obliteration, Gregory argues, is the very condition of Soja’s visualizing representation. For Gregory, these struggles and cultures exemplify what Michel de Certeau calls ground-level practices or “tactics of lived space,” activities that resist the regulatory control implicit in aerial perspectives.<sup>6</sup> Gregory thus adopts de Certeau’s influential streets/heights dualism as a structure for criticizing neo-Marxist geography’s discursive

spatializations. By operating at street level, Gregory asserts, or, more precisely, by adding an account of local, resistant practices to an overarching political economic framework, Davis avoids arranging the city into an image and consequently relinquishes the position of the detective. Yet there is an incongruity—one that usefully undermines the streets/heights opposition—in Gregory’s trenchant critique. For the milieu of the *noir* investigator, Gregory’s symbol of the controlling look, is the “mean streets,” the very site Gregory privileges as a safeguard against voyeurism and so idealizes as the real.

In fact, though Gregory portrays him as the antithesis of Soja’s detective, no urban scholar is more regularly linked to *noir* than Davis. Both endorsements on the jacket of *City of Quartz*, Davis’ forceful analysis of Los Angeles, as well as the press release for the volume, make the comparison:

*Mike Davis knows where a lot of bodies are buried....This is fine history noir....*

*Davis is wild at heart yet brilliantly controlled. This book is as accessible and fast-paced as film noir.*

*Combining the rigor of a cultural theorist and historian with the hardboiled clarity of a Philip Marlowe or a Jake Gittis, Davis uncovers extraordinary tales of greed, power, and prejudice....*

No doubt, the book’s candid fascination with *noir* sensibility inspires such characterizations. Stylistically, Davis’ language can recall what *noir* criticism conventionally terms the “gritty realism” of the urban tough-guy novel. His atmospheric descriptions of L.A. rival *film noir*’s celebrated “high-contrast visual style.” More to the point, *noir* occupies one pole of a thematic polarization within which Davis frames his picture of Los Angeles. Heralding the author’s own project, the book’s first chapter, “Sunshine or *Noir*?” examines the relationship of successive generations of intellectuals to L.A. Davis constructs a typology of cultural representations of Los Angeles, a city that, in his words, is “infinitely envisioned.” Indeed, “it has come to play the double role of utopia and dystopia for advanced capitalism” in cultural productions whose opposing outlooks Davis labels, respectively, “sunshine” and “*noir*.”<sup>7</sup> Davis carefully distinguishes among a variety of tendencies within the “complex corpus of...*noir*” which exemplifies the “acute critiques” of late capitalist culture generated in Los Angeles. In the hands of “leftish auteurs noirs,” he concludes, *film noir*, mirrored in 1940’s hardboiled L.A. writing, “sometimes approached a kind of Marxist cinema manque.” Over the years, it has even “come to function as a surrogate public history” that contests the powerful “city myth” constructed by L.A.’s “official dream machinery.”

Associating his own alternative history of L.A. with *noir* fictions, Davis seems to be defining urban theory as a discourse that not only analyzes the meanings of representations of the city but, like *noir*, produces images of the city. Such a reading of urban scholarship as culture, not “social science,” is a welcome departure from the field’s traditional configuration of interdisciplinary space. Acknowledging the permeability of the boundaries between disciplines, it promises to bring the insights of urban political economy into the arena of cultural studies while dislodging political economy from a privileged position as the a priori basis of spatial politics. Yet Davis renegees on re-articulating the political field insofar as he interprets *noir* itself as a kind of social science. Into the sunshine-*noir* schema, he introduces a third category of L.A. representations:

"We must avoid the idea that Los Angeles is ultimately just the mirror of Narcissus....Beyond the myriad rhetorics and mirages, it can be presumed that the city actually exists. I thus treat, within the master dialectic of sunshine and noir, three attempts, in successive generations, to establish authentic epistemologies for Los Angeles."<sup>8</sup>

Davis then outlines two current efforts to construct such an authentic epistemology: the research into postfordist urbanism by "the neo-Marxist academics of the 'Los Angeles School'" and the interventions in popular culture by "the community intellectuals of 'Gangster Rap.'" In Davis' view, both projects have failed—for different reasons—to disengage themselves fully from today's "corporate celebration of 'postmodern' Los Angeles." Despite their failure, Davis concludes, "a radical structural analysis...can only acquire social force if it is embodied in an alternative experiential vision."

*City of Quartz* accepts this mandate. As Gregory notes, Davis combines an economic analysis of spatial organization with an account of the struggles of Los Angeles' Third World street cultures—at least, certain aspects of those struggles. Thus he locates urban meaning in a terrain between global capitalist structures and the use of the city by specific social groups. But when, under the rubric of *noir*, Davis designates his achievement an "authentic epistemology," a representation governed by an independent, authenticating model—the L.A. that really exists—he does more than extricate urban scholarship from the city's official dream machinery. By disavowing the question of subjectivity in representations of the city, he disengages urban theory and, strangely, *noir* as well, from any dream machinery whatsoever.

Consider "Chinatown, Part Two?" This essay, foreshadowing *City of Quartz*, explicitly equates radical urban analysis with a specific instance of *noir* detection, the investigation undertaken by private-eye Jake Gittes in *Chinatown*, urban studies' archetypal *film noir*. "What Jake discovers about Downtown," as Davis puts it—political corruption, landgrabs, the forced displacement of farmers during L.A.'s early-twentieth century aqueduct conspiracy—is the precursor of what Davis reveals about contemporary Downtown: quiet municipal subsidization of super-profit speculation, conducted under the aegis of the Community Redevelopment Agency, as one of the consequences of post-Fordist restructuring. To be sure, these are crucial discoveries. Like Jake, Davis brings to light the links between certain violent activities in urban space—the displacement of city residents, for instance—and the violence inherent in the uneven socioeconomic relations that produce advanced capitalist space.

Still, this is only part of the story. What Jake discovers about Downtown is not *only* speculation and the murderous power of money. An investigator of illicit love affairs, he also finds domestic violence, ambiguous family identities and—as he trails the mysterious Mrs. Mulwray through Los Angeles—a tale of incest and a father's sexual power. Nor are the violent spaces Jake investigates strictly outside himself. Rather, as in countless *noir* scenarios, the qualities that make the city "realistic"—its meanness, decadence, violence—do not just express sociological conditions or, what amounts to the same thing, psychological experiences engendered in ready-made city dwellers by the real urban environment. These qualities also entangle the city with the protagonist's psychic geography, with the spatial processes that form his identity. *Chinatown* is the site of a traumatic loss in Jake's past—a woman's death—which

he relives as the adventure unravels and which, with the film's final eruption of violence, he is destined to "forget" again. As Jake is repeatedly brutalized, as his own quest to probe Mrs. Mulwray's secrets grows more cruelly determined, his path leads beyond the discovery of political corruption or sexual scandals. It takes him into an area that is outside the law in another sense: the image of the city, like the image of the woman, is mediated by the detective's unconscious fantasies and so—whether lucid or bewildering—is tied up with the mysteries of sexuality.

Overlooked in Davis' gloss on *Chinatown*, problems of sexuality and subjectivity—and of their intimacy with violence—have long been viewed by feminist critics as *film noir*'s principle themes and, moreover, as the imperatives shaping its visual and narrative structures. Feminist readings have also theorized these problems spatially, showing how the detective story mobilizes a distinctive spatial *mise en scene* organized along the lines of sexual difference. The neglect of such ideas in urban cultural history that is equated with *noir* corresponds to a general indifference to feminist perspectives in these texts' accounts of urban violence, an erasure paralleling, in turn, a troubling silence on issues of gender. It is easy to understand the effects of avoiding feminist cultural criticism. Making it possible to disregard the *noir* detective's ambivalent relationship to the city and to relegate the sources of violence to an objective socioeconomic realm—"the mean streets"—it facilitates an equally untroubled identification of the urban theorist with the private eye—"who is not himself mean." By the same token, to acknowledge the reciprocity between subjects and objects of *noir* detection is to face difficulties in urban studies' self-representation. For one thing, the desire to render urban theorists in the image of *noir* investigators then seems to contradict the equally strong impulse—embodied in espousals of authentic epistemologies—to believe that urban space as an object of analysis can be specified externally to the space of the writer/reader. Doubling this inside/outside dichotomy is not the same as asserting that the city does not really exist. But insofar as spatial theory enforces a rigid separation of the two spaces in discourses about the city and, as a result, can push violence wholesale into the "outside" world, it appears less like *film noir* and closer to the "unrealistic" whodunit that Raymond Chandler so despised.

According to Laura Mulvey, what distinguishes "the simple detectives of the whodunit" from "the modern, post-psychoanalytic, heroes-in-crisis of the *film noir*" is, precisely, the theme of internal transformation animating the latter: "The story he investigates is his own."<sup>9</sup> Mary Ann Doane also analyzes *noir* in terms of the construction of masculine identity. *Film noir*, she writes, following Christine Gledhill, abandons the usual goal of the detective film, "the comprehensible solution of crime." Instead, it "constitutes itself as a detour, a bending of the hermeneutic code from the questions connected with a crime to the difficulty posed by the woman as enigma (or crime)."<sup>10</sup> For Mulvey and for Teresa de Lauretis, the protagonist's effort to solve the enigma links *noir* to the structure of the detective narrative understood as a type of the Oedipal myth. The movement of the narrative, de Lauretis argues, establishes the difference between the sexes, an operation also performed in the story's spatial structure: it "produces the masculine position as that of mythical subject and the feminine position as mythical obstacle or, simply, the space in which that movement occurs."<sup>11</sup> Within the visual relations of narrative cin-

ema, the masculine position is also the place of the look, the feminine position, that of image—and landscape. It has become a commonplace of *noir* criticism to observe that, in *noir*, the figure of the *femme fatale* resists confinement in—or as—space and, crossing boundaries, threatens the security of the protagonist's identity. The role of the urban detective and, some critics believe, the work of *noir* itself, is to repress her image—how successfully is a controversial matter—restoring spatial order and, with it, his own perceptual clarity and geographic proficiency.

This fragmentary sketch is not meant to do justice to the complexity of *Chinatown*, *noir* or feminist opinions about *noir*. Even less does it defend a psychic, rather than social, determinist explanation of urban violence or advocate "psychoanalytic" readings of urban theory that claim to find in an author's work evidence of individual conflicts or a generalized sexual symbolism. But a critical glance at *noir* does suggest that the new urban studies may bear some resemblance to hard-boiled stories after all. In each case, an urban investigator sets out on a search which, presented as a quest for reality, is actually a way of articulating a vision of reality. In each case, an image of space plays a key role in a more intricate spatial production: the emergence of a subject whose integrity rests on the ability to detect what lies behind a facade of spatial uncertainties, identified in *noir* with the *femme fatale* and, in neo-Marxist spatial theory with—differently—post-Fordist capitalism. If, in *noir*, the detective's stability returns with the woman's downfall, in urban criticism it can be gained—again, differently—by the "discovery" of an underlying economic cause of spatial violence or by other rigid externalizations of political space. These respective endings are not unconnected, however, since the appeal to such grounds, protecting the authority of a single reference point, cleanses sexuality and difference from urban discourse and from its picture of the city. For this reason, the difference expressed by Davis' alternative vision of L.A., despite its important opposition to official urban rhetoric, is still largely a masculine terrain. Will urban theory interrogate this space? Or will it remain "just Chinatown"?

#### Notes

1. Raymond Chandler, "The Simple Art of Murder," in *The Simple Art of Murder*, New York, Vintage Books, 1934, p. 17.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
3. Derek Gregory, "Chinatown, Part Three? Soja and the Missing Spaces of Social Theory," *Strategies*, no. 3, 1990, 40-104.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
5. Mike Davis, "Chinatown, Part Two? The 'Internationalization' of Downtown Los Angeles," *New Left Review*, July/August 1987, 65-86.
6. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley, California, University of California Press, 1984.
7. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, London and New York, Verso, 1990, p. 19.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
9. Laura Mulvey, "The Oedipus Myth: Beyond the Riddles of the Sphinx," in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1989, p. 190.
10. Mary Ann Doane, "Gilda: Epistemology as Striptease," in *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*, New York and London, Routledge, 1991, p. 102.
11. Teresa de Lauretis, "Desire in Narrative," in *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984, p. 143.