

## **A Chance Encounter**

### **Film Noir and Badiou's Concept of the Situation**

2008 Barnett R. *ZX #4*. Art School Press, Manukau School of Visual Arts, 80-87.

#### **ABSTRACT**

This essay uses Badiou's concept of the situation to discuss the movies of the 1940s and 50s known as film noir. In film noir the human subject experiences the city as the site of an encounter with an event that ruptures the order of their ordinary experience. The indifferent multiplicity of the situation provides the noir protagonist with a project. By means of this project the person becomes a subject, and a sequence of events begins that, after crime, crisis and disaster, eventually ends in a luminous experience of truth. The essay shows that film noir provides a useful exemplification of Badiou's work.

## A Chance Encounter: Film Noir and Badiou's Concept of the Situation

In mid-20<sup>th</sup> century art production the idea of the city evoked the structures and processes of the human subject with a special intensity. The "modern" subject, nearly always urban, became the focus of poetry (Pound, Eliot), painting (Hopper, Lowry), the novel (Joyce, Kafka) and philosophy (Camus, Merleau-Ponty). But nowhere was the anomie, the inherent loneliness and loss of autonomy of the human subject more faithfully and powerfully depicted than in the brooding American cinema of the forties and fifties that has become known as film noir. The term was coined by French critics to describe a type of film that is characterized by a dark, sombre tone and a tense nervousness. Typically urban in setting, the noir films of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century explored the ambiguous relations between human beings and the unseen forces that seem both to shape and destabilize human experience. In these films an epistemological uncertainty is disclosed and the urban realm is depicted by means of an intangibility of tone, mood, meaning and purpose. The noir protagonist searches a labyrinth only to discover finally at its centre the primal scene of his own undoing, by a monster who is his or her own double. The films described in this essay are all canonical, or classic, movies of the genre. They are chosen because they are readily available and well-known, and anyone who is interested may cross-reference the argument advanced in this essay with their own readings of the films.

Benjamin had called the modern city "a landscape stripped of all thresholds." Of the human subject's experience of the modern city he argues that it "... splits into dialectical poles. It becomes a landscape that opens up to him and a parlour that encloses him." (White, 2001: 46) Noir films capture this dialectic, with their claustrophobic intensity and their insistence on the urban landscape as a geography of crime and transgression. In film after film the decentred human nature of the modern individual encounters within the urban field the revelatory event that precipitates their complicated path to doom. Using the work of French philosopher Alain Badiou as a point of origin,<sup>1</sup> this present essay attempts to show that the modern noir landscape is a field of murky possibilities in which the human subject encounters a critical event that disrupts their situation. Through the agency this encounter promotes, the subject creates its project as a human being and transforms the situation. The subject sees the violent and disordered city as an absolute reality which, at certain locations opens up to the possibility of a disruptive occurrence. This event (or *supplement*), both turbulent and unpredictable, provides a rupture in the situation and through this a passage to something which, initially indiscernible, is both singular and sovereign. Badiou calls this "something" truth. A truth is something new. In order for it to come into being a subject must encounter an event and decide to investigate "in fidelity" to that event. Through this enquiry, which is difficult – usually dangerous - a truth of consequence for the subject and the situation will appear. In the noir film the protagonist's enquiry is a series of choices made in relation to their situation. Some are "good," some are "bad" – they are all throws of the dice, decisions – "pure choices" - made in the face of a set of possibilities that it is logically impossible to decide between. In a sense, the protagonist constructs their own

truth, locally, within the indiscernible terms of a particular situation, and this truth transforms them. Most noir films are about this passage from unpredictable event through crisis to truth (however unpalatable).

The noir urban landscape is far from the abstract realm of civic administration that tries to control representations of spatial and social order. Instead it is a dark field in which there is no clear separation of self from scene, subject from world. Relations between humans and this landscape are constructed with intimacy and care even though they are fleeting and desperate, just because the urban is a realm of multitudinous promises and scarce discoveries. In film noir human nature, itself an open realm of multiplicities, resists and breaks down normative social and spatial practices. Particular places in the city become sites of specific performances of resistance and transgression that, by their very nature, are impossible of escape exactly because they are what Badiou calls *sites événemential*, evental-sites at which unpredictable and potentially life-changing events may occur.<sup>ii</sup> Such a site is described by Badiou as “on the edge of the void” (Badiou 2007: 175).

Badiou describes what he understands to be a “situation” as

...an ordinary multiple, a multiple that is obviously infinite because all situations in reality are infinite. It can be a historical, political, artistic, or mathematic situation; it can even be a subjective situation. I take situation in an exceptionally open sense, and to capture that openness I say it's a multiplicity. (Badiou, 2000: 64n6)

A dream, a farm, a divorce, a stock prediction, a death in the family, a supermarket, a street, a bad hair day, a crime scene are all situations. They come in any modality; can be necessary, contingent, actual, possible, virtual, potential (Feltham and Clemens 2004: 10). A situation is a set of multiples all of which are composed of further multiples, and all of which can belong to different situations. There is no unified totality that encompasses situations, their relations are always adaptive and dynamic. This openness and multiplicity are very much a part of film noir. Films such as *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1944) deploy a changing set of scales, places, and modes of spatial practice to present as clearly as possible the simultaneity of the urban uncanny, its embeddedness in everyday life. *The Big Sleep* invites us to consider the city as an open whole and itself as a single movement that expresses this openness by means of a distribution of its multiple elements through the various sets and subsets of the film. Badiou further argues that not every human being is a subject, but some human beings become subjects; those who act in fidelity to a chance encounter with an event that disrupts the situation in which they find themselves. (Oliver and Clemens, 2004: 6) A subject for Badiou is “revealed locally,” a “finite instance of a truth” that “forces a decision ... and saves the singular.” (Badiou, 2007: 523) The human subject is not, then, the self-identical subject of analytical philosophy classical ontology; rather it is a decentred, criss-crossed multiplicity, a “finite, local configuration of a generic procedure” – the subject is the series of enquiries it conducts. “[B]orn of a human being's decision that something they have *encountered*, which has happened in their situation” – often, mostly, foreign and abnormal, the subject “does in fact belong to the

situation and cannot be overlooked" (Oliver and Clemens, 2004: 6). In most noir films an event occurs in the first ten minutes and the rest of the film is a chain of reactions to it. The film documents the protagonist's subjectivization, their process of becoming a subject through the series of enquiries they make into the inaugurating occurrence.

In noir, therefore, it is their extraordinary decisions and actions that isolate individuals from their context and show that a human can actually be a free agent that supports new chains of actions and reactions. By contrast, the decisions and actions of everyday life which, for Heidegger, tear the understanding away from the possibility of authenticity and into a "tranquillising supposition that it possesses everything, or that everything is within its reach" (Heidegger, 1962: 179) – these decisions are not evidence of agency for Badiou (whose work echoes Heidegger's in this respect).

The situation, in noir, always has a deeply personal dimension that is rendered in a stark and unremitting light against a background of impenetrable shadow. Inevitably, for the protagonist of a noir film, the situation provokes a dramatic event; it will either diminish his or her power of action, or increase it, depending on their response. In *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944) for instance, insurance salesman Walter Neff, half enticed by the woman with whom he has convinced himself he is in love, half driven by his craving for "something big," becomes entangled in a process which he neither fully comprehends nor fully controls. It seems that he has been "thrown" into the world by an unexpected encounter with another, swept away, has even "fallen." But this is not a complete submission to fate. Although drawn ineluctably into a configuration of events that is different from what he usually inhabits, Neff is not pulled *deterministically* towards a banal conclusion by some teleology of doom. The subject's thrown-ness is actually a prerequisite for a subtle understanding of its own complicity in the drama of actualization. Neff recognizes his fateful conversation with Phyllis Dietrichson, the femme fatale who convinces him to murder her husband and collect the insurance, as an event whose implications concern the nature of the entire situation. Badiou calls the decision that results from such recognition - the individual's decision that has such transformational consequences for the situation - an 'intervention,' a term which highlights the individual's agency. Even though Neff has been thrown into this process, the point is that he can come to some sort of resolution by way of the "project" he has placed before himself. That is, to get away with murder – just because he won't get away with it.

In order to complete his project Neff must take his "ride to the end of the line" as his boss Barton Keyes puts it when he discovers his employee's error of judgement. The action then moves from the socially empty - but horticulturally lush - landscape of residential LA where Neff lives, to the empty *terrain vague* railroad landscape of the city edge where he drapes the vamp's husband's body on the railway line. In noir this kind of "line of flight" occurs within a complex shifting field of multiples whose flows and counter-flows permeate and configure the urban subject. The protagonist is faced with the task of "putting right what can never be put right" (Lapsey, 1997: 186). Neff is sucked into the turbine of urban experience. According to film noir theorist Lapsey, the noir city is a

disordering space “which promises but forever defers self-realisation” (Lapsey: 186). But this interpretation is just what Badiou’s concept of the situation countermands: self-realization is an ingredient in the new situation that is called into being by the subject’s project, even if fleeting and inarticulate. Master of his own misfortune, ambiguously responsible for the dangerous mess he is in, Neff faces ruination, and within this hopelessness he finds, blurred and flimsy, a project – the reversal of this experience of *ruinance*. Confronted with this disorder, Ness works to reconstruct his situation, a task as impossible as it is unavoidable but which, if carried through, can produce an entirely new set of multiples.

And here we find the ontological premise of the film. Neff puts the body of a man he has just murdered on a railway track to make it look like he has fallen off, and been killed by, a train. Neff acknowledges the situation in such a manner as to take over, in his acquiescence to fate, the self that is at risk. The implication is that Neff’s life up to this point has been taken from him. The justification for his existence has gone. He is alone and in his solitude has discovered that life has been given him “for nothing.” Hence, the critical, undecidable, decision. But *Double Indemnity* does not leave Neff without a possibility for – and this is not redemption – the excruciating experience of a totally *lived* self-reality. Right out there on the railway track, lines of force coursing through his being, the multiple subject of the modern city lays his old self down to destruction. It is dark night. The scene is shot from below so that the desperate protagonist looms anamorphically against the pitch sky. Neff drags the body on to the line. This is quintessential noir: Neff has created out of a situation a prolonged investigation of the consequences of the inaugurating event. It is this enquiry that the noir film chronicles and presents. It is an urban investigation, which traces the intersecting trajectories of the “they,” the subjects that are not the subject of the protagonist, through a world that holds the situation in specifically urban modes of articulation.

The noir film premise that you don’t have a subject until you have a project, exemplified in *Double Indemnity*, and in *Scarlet Street* (Fritz Lang, 1944), *D.O.A.* (Rudolph Mate, 1950), and *Kiss Me Deadly* (Robert Aldrich, 1955), places the viewer within the lived experience of the subject of the film. In this way we live his experience of the city through his experience of his own contingent and quite de-stabilized subjectivity. It is precisely noir’s emphasis on lived experience that makes its urban field so real and present. It *creates* the city by discovering the material of the urban world and in so doing redeems the urban from its dormant state of virtual non-existence, making its reality physical.

The physicality is critical to our experience of the experience. In *D.O.A.*, for instance, a number of similar scenes are shot in the streets of San Francisco and Los Angeles. In both night and daytime scenes the streets are depicted as frantic with motion, traffic weaving – cars, trucks, buses, trams – and the sidewalks full of pedestrians all seemingly determined to get somewhere important quickly. The protagonist is Frank Bigelow, who has unwittingly drunk iridium, a radioactive substance which will kill him in 24 hours. This is the supplement, unpredictable, incalculable. The film is the story of Bigelow’s panic-stricken hunt for both killer and cure. His predicament propels him through the city at an even faster rate than the seemingly fanatical urbanites around

him, and against the general flow of their movement. We experience these pedestrians as the “they” on which Bigelow has ordinarily depended for his self-affirmation. And we feel the jolt of realization that comes when we discover that despite the fact that Bigelow’s quest is hopeless, and that he must die, he is nevertheless, in his *project*, impelled by a different order of desire than they, and that his living/dying is in fact a way of being in a closer relationship to something they can only discern vaguely through their compulsion.

It is not the case, however, that “they” are not in the city too. This is, after all, the site of their lives, and they can all have chance encounters with unpredictable events too. Some do, some don’t. The probability of encounter is not great according to Badiou. Whether an event belongs to a situation or not is actually undecidable, as is whether a subject will recognize its occurrence. This undecidability is the mark of the urban. All noir city-dwellers are immersed in contingency and unpredictability, not just the protagonist of the film. Amongst the thousands of minute, ongoing reiterations that comprise their day sometimes a supplement will appear and interrupt the repetition. For any one individual the critical action is a decision to recognize and name this disturbance. If the event can be understood within the language of their everyday life it is not a supplement. But if it is recognized there is no going back. An intervention occurs which will lead to a radical redistribution of the individual’s priorities. Something becomes so important as to overwhelm both subject and situation. Noir films often use voice-over narrative as a device to dramatise this transfiguration of the subject. “Do you want to hear me out or don’t you captain? I don’t have much time,” asks Bigelow, about to die on the homicide detective’s office floor. The captain replies drily, “You tell it any way you like” and Bigelow gasps out his story, the story that the rest of the film depicts.

As well as voice-over, other noir conventions such as the point-of-view camera angle and claustrophobic lighting are used to convey subjective experience. German expressionist director Fritz Lang once remarked “I use my camera in such a way as to show things, wherever possible, from the viewpoint of the protagonist; in that way my audience identifies itself with the character on the screen and thinks with him.” (Bogdanovich, 1967: 85) While it is subject-dependent, this approach is not subject-centred. The noir film correlative of novelistic stream-of-consciousness specifically blurs the boundaries between multiples. The noir subject is not the counterpart of an object, the city. The subject and the city form a set of multiples that blend and clash. Individual experience cannot be divided. It is an aggregate of separate fragments that loom and disappear, always in motion, according to chance. There is no predestination in Badiou’s world or in noir, no higher order, nothing other than chance encounters out of which subjects may be born. The relationship between the protagonist and the urban matrix is interactive; boundaries are porous, the multiplicities comprising situations are constantly changing in emphasis, in influence, always shifting from mode to mode, and all the time moving under the influence of an affective tone that accentuates the subjectivization process. This is communicated by means of a range of techniques including a considered deployment of the *mise-en-scène*, *chiaroscuro* lighting, mobile camerawork and the use of fractured narratives. The filmic experience is delivered through the creation of a distinctive emotional milieu, the shiny rain-swept streets, the neon-lit nightclubs and deep, poetic urban landscape

perspectives that convey an image of the city as the pre-eminent site of danger and desire. What film noir shows us is the utter complicity of the situation in the construction of the subject's lived experience.

The male protagonist, typically confused, or divided, and often deeply introspective, creates a distinctly modern, affective experience of the city through an immediate transaction, shared intimately by the viewer, of symbolic elements that are presented as quintessentially urban. The capacity of noir to reduce the complex modalities of experiencing to the simple fact of immediate, lived experience represents the urban field as a dynamic transactive phenomenon, where the subject is not different from the act of enquiry. This combination of affective tone and immediate experience presents the disordered and violent city as a network of multiplicities where crime, sexuality, and death become *sites événementiellement*, intensifications of the urban matrix, *specific points* where a hole opens up and the artificial, civic, rational city is sucked into the natural cauldron of human desire.

Once this has occurred, the situation changes drastically. The 'ground model' that schematizes the situation prior to the arrival of the event cannot be known because it is not presented at the level of belonging to the situation (Feltham and Clemens 2004: 29). This ground model, however, provides the ontological schema of the situation. When the event occurs it is added to the ground model and forms a new set of multiples that can exist at the level of presentation. The new set provides the ontological schema of a situation that has undergone wholesale change. The urban ocean through which the "new" Frank Bigelow navigates is condensed into an inherently unstable flux that swarms around him, at once resistant, preventing him from achieving his personal gnosis, and at the same time propulsive, pushing him on towards certain extinction. He is disoriented, unsure, indecisively decisive: all the coordinates of his existence have changed. But a set of distinctive *chronotopes* emerges from the mix.<sup>iii</sup> *D.O.A.* is set initially beyond time and place, in small town Banning ("out on the desert"), then in San Francisco ("where everyone wants a good time") and then in Los Angeles where his project is finally consummated. Within the two cities locations are clearly announced. Bigelow stays at the St Francis Hotel in San Francisco, and the Allison in Los Angeles. He visits a bar called The Fisherman on Fisherman's Wharf, where he is poisoned. He ends up on the Embarcadero. In Los Angeles the sinister Phillips' office is in the Bradbury Building. Mrs Phillips lives at the Sunset Apartments. Psychopathic gun-man Chester drives Bigelow down Sunset Boulevard. These geographies provide both stability and instability. The urban landscapes of both San Francisco and Los Angeles are continually to be seen on the screen, placing the action, providing veracity and verisimilitude, at the same time as they enter into the re-arrangement of symbols and images that reconfigure Bigelow's experience. A firm evocation of place emerges from the mix to counterpoint Frank Bigelow's point of view which is a distorting lens that continually upsets and disorients the viewer's ability to evaluate context.

Paradoxically, it is critical for the emergence of the truth that Bigelow cannot know 'what really happened.' The elements that the truth of a subject or a situation concerns can never be forced into knowledge. In *D.O.A.* it is this knowledge that is Dead on Arrival. There is always, in any situation, Badiou says, a point that resists the

totalization of knowledge about that situation. He calls this point of resistance the *unnameable* of the situation (Badiou 2004: 66). The noir subject is both haunted and propelled by the unnameable. Close ups of Bigelow's face show him throughout his ordeal as anguished, uncomprehending, fearful, enraged. It is impossible for everything to be said and this impossibility provides a good deal of the tension in the film, on a number of levels. Frank's deeply engrained small-town morality requires a clarity of disclosure and conduct that he cannot obtain. Paula, his fiancée, gets to know more about Frank by telephone over a period of 24 hours than she has in their entire relationship. He lies, ("When are you coming home Frank?" "Soon, Paula, I'm coming home soon") he dissembles, he shouts, he cries. He never tells her the single most important fact about himself, that he may soon be dead. There is no real certainty that Frank *will* die however or, even if he does, quite how. The prognosis of the medical authorities is vague, and Frank is put in immediate danger of death a number of times, mostly at gunpoint. How is he to understand this layered phenomenology? Why should he struggle against Marla, Chester, Halliday? He can barely hear them for the noise of doom. It is precisely this, the limit of the potency of truth, that is excluded from having a proper name. This is the unnameable, inexpressible *real* of Frank's situation, that which underwrites and authorizes its truth but does not participate in its truth.

In noir the subjects who are involved in bringing about the transformations entailed by the event are immersed in a praxis composed of both willed and random incidents. They are separated from knowledge, and are trying to 'work out' what has happened, and is continuing to happen, to them. Their whole emotional life is laid bare in an 'aleatory trajectory' that is characterized by a *forcing* of the new (Badiou 2007: 403). The noir film documents a titanic struggle between the old and the new. This struggle, this hazardous enforcement of wholesale change, typically, is illuminated in noir by its manipulation of light. The situation of the noir subject is dramatically lit by "an organic zig-zag line" which passes through things and people, and imbues them with a nervous energy (Deleuze's phrase in Bogue, 2003: 59). In *Detour* (Edgar G. Ulmer, 1945) – whose very name invokes a swerve from the ordinary – we find an expressive visual register pitched so high that the path into darkness can barely be seen, only the darkness itself, a palpable signifier of grim necessity highlighted sporadically by white flashes. Black and white film provides a perfect visual milieu for conflict: "The primitive but always effective symbolism of light versus darkness, white purity versus black evil, the opposition between gloom and radiance, is inexhaustible." (Arnheim 1958: 62).

This merging of agonal movement and image in film, expressing the imminence of subject in situation, forges an identity of matter and light. The image is movement as matter is light. Light, therefore is in things, it actualizes the thing for vision. (Bogue, 2003: 34) When something is not lit it cannot exist. The darkness of the noir landscape is the darkness of the non-existent; subjects, multiplicities, elements move in and out of existence seemingly arbitrarily, emphasizing the difficult, experimental nature of the subject's enquiry by making small things significant and important things 'indiscernible.'

Both *Detour* and *Kiss Me Deadly* (Robert Aldrich, 1955) use a hard, impenetrable light and a deep, black dark to dislocate and disrupt meaning. Noir lighting techniques such as the variability of lighting positions, deep focus and low-key light placement serve in both films to illuminate a resistant, cold world. In *Kiss Me Deadly* this world is distorted by the use of the 3-D deep focus technique of *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), so that an anamorphic surreality provides a counterpoint to the frustrated violence of Mike Hammer, "... a serial killer with a detective's licence..." (Davis, 2001: 40) The lighting draws attention to Hammer's entrapment in his right-wing value system and to the ambiguous morality that characterizes the situation of the America the film depicts. *Kiss Me Deadly* ends with an apocalyptic nuclear conflagration that is a *tour-de-force* of noir lighting. The radioactive substance that is the centre of the film's narrative explodes like an atomic bomb. A Los Angeles beach house goes up with it, and the protagonists escape through a series of moving, interlocking planes of jet black and white light, as through a portal to another world. Flames arc catatonically against a deep void and the huge elongated shadows of the fleeing couple are flung diagonally along the beach, as foaming sea waves, irradiated by nuclear light, spin into the darkness. These two, it is clear, are escaping into nothingness, the non-existent, the absent. The truth.

In *Detour* the lighting is again a critical element in the 'intervention' of the protagonists, emblemizing and intensifying their becoming-subjects. Immense black wings fan out behind the bad girl in the hotel room as she lifts the phone to tell the cops her hapless sucker has killed a man. All that exists (all that is framed on screen) is the image of the face: the girl who emasculates and loves it. Her black brows arch and her dark lips curl: holes in the face, the planes of the face lit against the pitch beyond. The modern primitive, forcing its way out of the darkness, facial holes streaming evil, a Gothic pre-organic vitalism spreading through the closed system of the room. This energetic force of light connects all the things it touches, and draws them into its web of changing and developing relations: her eyes, her earrings, teeth and lips, the bottle, telephone and lampshade, a pliant geometry which includes the angle of her brows in the same diagram as the plane of shadow on the wall behind. Here, light and shadow are separate infinite forces in perpetual conflict. It is this confrontation that generates the geometry of shades, and through the struggle of light and shadow the intensity of her will moves in a jagged pattern at the very edge of the visible. Now we know she will die. She is too luminescent to live. Too brilliant, too dazzling, too full of the terrible primitive fire that burns the world.

This blazing light force is aligned with the discovery of something new, something which cannot be discerned in terms of existing categories but which can be, as it were, metaphorically expressed. This new thing is the singular and sovereign situation that emerges as the result of the dramatic trajectory that the noir subject traces through the world. The movement of dramatically lit bodies in a complex and divided spatiality, and of the relations between them, a movement which occurs in different time frames and which jumps spontaneously from level to level at intensities, this is the complicated ballet of the modern noir subject. This subject is in the grip of larger forces, the "laws of fate," which are disturbed "without reason," by chance, by a spontaneous irruption. Through his or her encounter with these forces the subject begins an interrogation of a situation beyond their

control. By means of an uncanny entanglement with, and dedication to, an all-too-human project which emerges from the situation, the noir subject is born anew. Even as it lies upside down in the wet gutter gasping its last words, shadows closing in, it is forcing truth.

### **Primary sources**

#### *The Big Sleep*

1946

Director and Producer: Howard Hawks

Screenplay: William Faulkner, Leigh Brackett and Jules Furthman; from the novel by Raymond Chandler

#### *Detour*

1945

Director: Edgar G. Ulmer

Producer: Leon Fromkiss

Screenplay: Martin Goldsmith

#### *D.O.A*

1950

Director: Rudolph Mate

Producer: Leo C. Popkin

Screenplay: Russell Rouse and Clarence Green

#### *Double Indemnity*

1944

Director: Billy Wilder

Producer: Joseph Sistrom

Screenplay: Raymond Chandler and Billy Wilder; from the novel by James M. Cain

#### *Kiss Me Deadly*

1955

Director and Producer: Robert Aldrich

Screenplay: A.I. Bezzerides; from the novel by Mickey Spillane

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<sup>i</sup> Badiou's major text *Being and Event* is the primary source of the work discussed in this article. I have also used the collection of essays called *Infinite Thought*, in particular the essay "Philosophy and Truth."

<sup>ii</sup> "Evental-site" is the translation used by Feltham and Clemens.

<sup>iii</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin's term. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*.