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To cite this article:

Culp, Andrew. 2024. "Afterword: What Lies Beneath." *Techniques Journal* 4 (Autumn).

To link to this article:

<http://techniquesjournal.com/afterword>

Journal homepage: techniquesjournal.com

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One could learn everything they need to know about infrastructure from film noir.¹ It forges the prototypical doomed protagonist, irredeemably linked to an underworld that demands they get their hands dirty.

Though the distinction is not always clear, it is important to distinguish between the hard-boiled white knight and the self-destructive noir protagonist (Ellroy 2010). A white knight walks the mean streets without losing their innocence, never duped and always measured, just. In noir, everyone is doomed. Everything comes at a price, few make it out alive, and yet, that is what makes it fun. The subversively grandiose characters never beat the grand themes of sex, race, class, or systemic corruption; at best, they are only held at bay.

Doomed by forces beyond its control, the first principle of dark infrastructures posits (1): For every issue infrastructure apparently solves, it simultaneously spawns new, possibly more intractable problems.

In noir, settings are not incidental; they serve as background, subject, and even character.² Its infrastructures act as a mirror for the psychological landscape, reflecting broader social conflicts. It is a world where a security camera is never just a security camera. These settings become a “psychogeography,” stirring subjective effects in the inhabitants of a built environment (Debord 1955).

Take, for instance, San Francisco’s maze of streets as depicted in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). Far from being just a geographical setting, these streets act as conduits of human desire and intention. They guide the audience through a tangle of motivations, ethical choices, and existential dilemmas.³ By contrast, the court intrigue of the Holy Roman Empire is no match for the film’s unscrupulous adventurers and sharp private eye (Elias 2006). Similarly, the bewildering heights of the Mission and the Golden Gate Bridge in *Vertigo* (1958) embody our own dizzying anxieties.

The lavish casinos in *Gilda* (1946) and the dark rooms of the isolated beach house of *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) are not just locations—they are living, breathing subjects that encapsulate human ambition, excess, and ensuing disillusionment. Even the opulent decay of mansions in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) or the intricate apartments in *Laura* (1944) offer more than decor. They cast ominous shadows, hiding intrigue and fatal attraction.⁴

Dark infrastructure morphs from a static backdrop to an active player in the drama. Whether it is the racial tension culminating in the chase through the oil refinery in *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959) or the seemingly innocuous train tracks in *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), they evolve into active participants.⁵ The ordinary becomes extraordinary as seemingly mundane locations become an integral part of the action.

Streets, alleys, bridges, and rivers can be peeled back to find a collective psyche. Infrastructure is never passive but rather a convergence of moving forces.⁶ Agents of oppressive development, sites mapped through emotion, or models of other fictions.⁷

Following a figure/ground inversion, the second principle of dark infrastructure articulates (2): Infrastructure is an active ground, not just a passive backdrop. It shapes and is shaped by the worlds of its inhabitants.

Dark infrastructures reveal technology’s dual function: infrastructure not only constructs a tangible world but an associated ideology.⁸ To think infrastructurally means interrogating more than the physical but also the ideological infrastructures that undergird society. This precedes the pushes and pulls of life with a smartphone, where every new technology is said to “make the world a better place.” The heyday of noir was the postwar era of big ideas, a world moved by titans of industry and nationwide planning—their dreams captured in scale models telegraphing plans to completely remake the landscape, physically and socially.⁹

Noir’s pessimism proves vital. When technology is presented as a panacea, its protagonists are rarely swayed by the postpolitical promises of technocrats.¹⁰ There may be plenty of dupes, but nobody is ever innocent. Beneath every “sure thing” and technical fix lies a hidden agenda. Viewers are clued into true causes: farmland does not just suddenly



dry up—its water has been diverted, and by someone with a name and address. Behind the story is another story, and if you are lucky, maybe the hint of an explanation.

The most dangerous are those who claim that they have no agenda at all.¹¹

Issuing a direct challenge to postpolitical complacency, the third principle of dark infrastructure contends (3): Infrastructure is inherently political; it is a physical manifestation of hidden agendas, political motives, and social struggles. To be neutral is to be complicit.

French philosopher and historian of science Georges Canguilhem offers a compelling image of the “milieu,” the lived environment in which organic life adapts and evolves.¹² According to Canguilhem, the milieu controls the subject without the subject even being aware of it. The milieu need not be the enclosed, surveilled world of the panoptic prison that Foucault described but rather the messy, open plan of a city—a place where control can be exerted subtly and almost invisibly.¹³ With the failure of conventional maps, dark infrastructure calls forth new, collective, and creative forms of tracing urban flows and processes.

Control is palpable in the late-night streets of Los Angeles or the chaotic border town in *Touch of Evil* (1958). They are spaces where individuals are guided, influenced, and even manipulated without necessarily being aware of the forces at play. Something interrupts them, reminding them to take stock of what exactly is going on.¹⁴ Noir characters are always beset by forces beyond their control. Perhaps they cannot see the levers of power, but they feel a tug when they are forced to make decisions.¹⁵ With every chilly gust that drives a detective to turn up their coat collar, noir films materialize the invisible architectures of control that Canguilhem theorized; this is how the audience learns that even freedom comes with constraints.

Informed by the subtleties of control, the fourth principle of dark infrastructure delineates (4): Infrastructure acts through a silent authority that guides and controls without making its presence directly felt. Those who fail to grasp its influence only find out after it is too late.

Noir moodiness is more than an atmosphere; it is the essence of critique.¹⁶ When the investigator’s eye mixes with German Expressionism’s play of light and shadow, the result is a critical logic of concealment and revelation.¹⁷ Its critical aesthetics forces the viewer to ask: What is now obvious? And what has become unthinkable?

For instance, in *Out of the Past* (1947), Jeff Bailey is a private investigator whose past catches up with him in a small, idyllic town bathed in sunlight. Contrary to the journalist’s creed that “sunlight is said to be the *best of disinfectants*,”¹⁸ the exposure here imperils Bailey, making him vulnerable and stripping away the anonymity that the shadows provided. At that time, mid-century development projects were promising a new, modern way of life in the suburbs, away from urban problems, part of newly planned communities.¹⁹ Yet it was driven by more than white flight—it was also propelled by developers systematically breaking up or just plain bypassing neighborhoods of color.

This paradox of exposure serves as a cautionary note against the partisans of the light against the dark—and in turn, revelation against concealment, mastery over inoperativity (Nancy 1991). In a genre driven by ambiguity, the old game of white-hat hero against black-hat villain just cannot do. Light bleaches, casting shadows where we least expect them (Laruelle 2013). In *The Big Heat* (1953), for example, domestic interiors, usually associated with safety and warmth, are brightly lit but become scenes of violence and betrayal. Light, here, exposes the hidden ugliness in seemingly pristine spaces, in which the protagonist’s pursuit of the truth leaves a trail of destruction.

We must resist the allure of transparency as an unequivocal good (Birchall 2001). In a world increasingly obsessed with the “right to know,” noir reminds us that exposure can also be a mechanism of manipulation and deceit (Birchall 2015).

Navigating the realm of opacity, the fifth principle of dark infrastructure asserts (5): The revelatory power of light also distorts; what it exposes, it also manipulates. In contrast, darkness can offer refuge, anonymity, and even emancipation.

Far from being mere entertainment or simple shock value, noir films also stage profound philosophical questions (Deleuze 2001). They become architectures of consciousness, where abstract philosophies manifest as flesh and phantom.

For example, *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947) offers more than a carnival funhouse; it presents the distorted reality of a shattered self. As Michael O'Hara navigates a disorienting maze of mirrors, the audience is led into an exploration of Cartesian skepticism—questioning the reliability of senses and the very nature of reality itself.²⁰ Each shattered glass panel serves as a metaphor for the collapse of a fragile, fragmented identity to reveal an inescapable truth.

Double Indemnity (1944), on the other hand, moves beyond its central plot to explore a fatalistic framework of existence. Walter Neff's irrevocable choices set him on a path symbolized by unyielding train tracks—each rail a rigid line of causality in a deterministic universe.²¹ The train becomes not just a vehicle but a manifestation of Neff's constrained consciousness, a mechanistic force pushing him toward his predetermined fate.

In *Touch of Evil*, a border town emerges as a microcosm of collective consciousness. A single, uninterrupted shot of a car carrying a time bomb encapsulates our collective fears and fates, painting a scenographic picture reminiscent of Leibniz's monadology.²² The camera's unwavering monadic focus constructs an architecture of collective awareness, assembling a tableau that captures diverse perspectives within a social landscape.

The Third Man (1949) takes us deep into the dank sewers of Vienna, transforming them into the subterranean architecture of the human conscience. As Holly Martins traverses this twisting, turning underworld, the setting transcends its utilitarian function, becoming a psychological realm where Kantian ethical dilemmas manifest physically—each turn in the tunnel as convoluted as the moral questions it poses.²³

Lastly, *Chinatown* (1974) unravels an architecture of sociopolitical consciousness, hidden behind the façade of municipal water utilities. J.J. Gittes's investigation into the water supply reveals hidden power structures that manipulate public thought and action. The film serves as a practical case study in Marxist theory, demonstrating how material conditions and power dynamics sculpt collective consciousness (Marx and Engels 1845). It turns something as everyday as water into an allegory for control and societal inequality.

Expanding on the philosophy of the concept, the sixth principle of dark infrastructures outlines (6): Infrastructure is not just physical; it can be purely abstract, crystallizing whole worlds of thought.

Dark infrastructures are not just things but psyches in physical form, clouded by hidden agendas and systemic dilemmas. They are the object lesson of noir dreamworlds, driven by a pessimistic feeling that for every supposed solution, even worse problems could arise. Steeped in the nightmarish contrasts of German Expressionism, classic noir admittedly hardly anticipates the digital present in which we are trapped (Dickos 2002). Even still, Kaneda and Tetsuo of *Akira* (1988), Spike and Faye of *Cowboy Bebop* (1998), and cyberpunk deck jockeys expand the aperture beyond postwar cities to postaccident cosmic event horizons. Herein lie the submerged politics of dark infrastructure: as much as they are the object of scrutiny, they must become the ground for action. Infrastructure encapsulates everything intolerable about the current moment, yet is also a focal point worth the struggle. To dissect these infrastructures is to confront the present; to engage with them is to dare imagine a world beyond our suffocating present.

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¹ There has been some work on noir as critical tool. Consider consulting Rob Coley, "In Defence of 'Noir Theory': Laruelle, Deleuze, and Other Detectives," *Theory, Culture & Society* 37, no. 3 (May 2020): 123–144 and Christopher Breu and Elizabeth A. Hatmaker, eds., *Noir Affect* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020).

² This insight follows from Thom Andersen's *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (2004).

³ For a theory of lines, consult Fernand Deligny, *The Arachnean and Other Texts*, trans. Drew S. Burk and Catherine Porter (Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2015).

⁴ I would be remiss not to mention feminist debates over the misogyny of noir. Three canonical entries are Rosalyn Deutsche, "Chinatown, Part Four? What Jake Forgets about Downtown," *Assemblage*, no. 20 (April 1993): 12–33; M. Christine Boyer, "Crimes in and of the City: The Femme Fatale as Urban Allegory," in *The Sex of Architecture*, ed. Diana Agrest, Patricia Conway, and Leslie Weisman (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 97–118; and Margaret Craw, "Investigating the City—Detective Fiction as Urban Interpretation: Reply to M. Christine Boyer," in *The Sex of Architecture*, ed. Diana Agrest, Patricia Conway, and Leslie Weisman (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 119–127.

⁵ A particularly vivid depiction of this process can be found in Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

⁶ See the discussion on "the unconscious of the urban" in Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, 1st edition (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992).

⁷ This is echoed in a discussion of the urban as a space of encounter, often of negative affects, as described in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

⁸ See Thesis 24 of Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (London: Rebel Press, 1994).

⁹ For instance, Henry Ford's anthropological project of making a New Man, David Harvey, "Fordism," in *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford; Cambridge: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991), 123–140.

¹⁰ Put quite precisely as a conflict between the technocracy of the police and the politics of those not sensible within the political, see Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

¹¹ A common refrain in ideology critique following Louis Althusser.

¹² See Georges Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, trans. Carolyn R. Fawcett (New York: Zone Books, 1991), as well as Georges Canguilhem, “The Living and Its Milieu,” trans. John Savage, *Grey Room*, no. 3 (2001): 7–6.

¹³ See, for instance, Brian Larkin, “The Cinematic Milieu: Technological Evolution, Digital Infrastructure, and Urban Space,” *Public Culture* 33, no. 3 (95) (September 1, 2021): 313–348.

¹⁴ Akin to a Skinner box, or more broadly, cybernetic feedback. See the discussion of “neural-livestock” in Gilles Châtelet, *To Live and Think like Pigs: The Incitement of Envy and Boredom in Market Democracies*, trans. Robin Mackay (Falmouth, UK; New York: Urbanomic; Sequence Press, 2014).

¹⁵ This is not meant to imply conspiracy but rather something closer to Foucault’s notion of governmentality. Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell III (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

¹⁶ See *Noir Affect* as referenced in note 1. It also corresponds with the argument that power no longer faces us as an enemy subject but an environment that is hostile to us. See Tiqqun, *Introduction to Civil War*, trans. Alexander R. Galloway and Jason E. Smith (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2010).

¹⁷ If I can suggest an odd juxtaposition, consider how the illicit noir protagonist is forced to become an agent of Rancière’s politics as they are dispossessed of any symbolic authority.

¹⁸ Commonly attributed to Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis.

¹⁹ A comparative argument can be made between racist mid-century housing policy and data proxies used today in algorithmically driven decision-making, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Discriminating Data: Correlation, Neighborhoods, and the New Politics of Recognition* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021).

²⁰ See “Optics,” usually published in conjunction with René Descartes, *Discours de la méthode* (Paris: Librairie classique Eugène Belin, 1861).

²¹ Both in his earlier *Human Nature* and later *De Corpore*, Hobbes takes on a mechanical causality that is basically a modified Aristotelian system. See Thomas Hobbes, *Human Nature and De Corpore Politico*, ed. J.C.A. Gaskin, Reissue edition (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

²² This point is developed in Crary, who argues that Leibniz has a “scenography” that takes the camera to be a monad that vertically surveys a city all at once. Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the 19th Century*, Reprint edition (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1992), 51–54.

²³ See Kant’s first and second critiques, Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. Marcus Weigelt, trans. Max Muller, Revised edition (London: Penguin Classics, 2008) and Mary Gregor and Immanuel Kant, trans., *Critique of Practical Reason*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).