

Katrin Meder

Noir City

Dystopian Snapshots

Noir is the title of a film Mirko Martin developed out of nothing but a sound recording. During his stay in Los Angeles in 2008, the artist constantly wandered the streets, occasionally recording the sounds he heard.

To begin with, the title directly alludes to what the viewer perceives: a black screen. In Konstantin Malevich's work, black was used to evoke the "objectless," or total void, but in Martin's work, sound charges it with narrative. He works with things we recollect from film history: helicopter sounds, gunshots, footsteps, breathing. Martin, however, does not recur to either the artistic tradition of the sound film or to Guy Debord's "film without film."¹ Instead, he creates an empty projection surface for the cinema inside the viewer's mind. The complete absence of images forces viewers to listen intently and to reconstruct things for themselves. An excited conversation between two men, written in superimposed white letters, is the only visual element,² and it explains what is going on at the moment. "*It's a weird night, buddy. These type of nights here, you just stay home.*" With the kind of dialogue that might be heard in a gangster movie, Martin triggers our associative mechanisms, plays with clichés, and then turns around to question them. He reveals the ambivalences inherent in the city of Los Angeles, oscillating between its hi-gloss surface and a reality full of crime and chaos. The shooting Martin recorded has an unreal feeling to it, as if it had been staged, because it does not correspond to our usual world of experiences. Viewers begin to round out what they hear with their own visual memories from the collective storehouse of cinematic images—most of them scenes from film noir.

Even during the early days of the cinema, the theme of the city, with its charms and dangers, exercised a strong power of attraction over filmmakers. First-generation films, such as Karl Grune's *Die Straße* (The Street, 1923), employ urban themes, showing the light and shadow sides of modern life: speed, the entertainment industry, and freedom, as well as crime, anonymity, amorality, and unemployment.³ During the

1940s and early 1950s, in the Los Angeles of the post-war depression, film noir crystallized out of the vortex of Hollywood's dream factory, producing an alternative dystopia. As the western film's grim alter ego,⁴ it shaped a portrait of a world of darkness, big-city streets, crime, and corruption. Its themes dealt with a marginalized society, whose moral affiliation with the rest of society was destabilized by financial, political, and ideological battles for survival.⁵ Film noir was called "black," thanks in part to its dark anti-heroes and allegorical settings: harbor piers, slums, and abandoned factories.⁶

It was in this kind of seedy environment that Martin recorded *Noir*. In particular, the last sequence of the soundtrack can be associated with stereotypical scenes from black-and-white film: several times, a man in the distance asks Martin for the time. "Good evening! What time do you got? Got the time?" Martin quickly passes by, without answering. "Well, thank you very much. Fuck off!" The situation holds a certain danger; the encounter might have swiftly turned into a violent assault. However, viewers assess the situation based on what they have learned from films: in Hollywood's vocabulary, scenes in which homeless people suddenly appear out of sinister-looking alleys are metaphors for the moment in which the underworld attacks the ordinary citizen.

The helicopter noise and the exchange of gunfire at the beginning of *Noir*, however, do not quite fit into the melancholy image of classic film noir. Films from the 1970s and 1980s, which deal with gang wars on the streets and the police force's daily battles against crime, provide the imagination with a new repertoire of images. Semi-documentaries, like *The New Centurions* (1972), are filmed in real settings and make the action seem especially realistic. Despite a few aesthetic parallels, Martin uses a completely different kind of method to make his film: whereas he records real sounds and dialogue that seem to be scripted—thus stirring some doubt about the authenticity of the documentation—semi-documentaries deliberately weave a fictional narrative out of actual places and events.⁷

It is in places like Los Angeles, where fiction and reality collide on a daily basis, that Martin looks for forceful interruptions of everyday life, capturing these transitional moments in videos and photographs. Occurrences on the edge of normality, such as fires or car accidents, are transformed through the artist's eye, turned into omens of personal misfortune, although they could also be seen as harbingers of an apocalypse. Along the fine line between the coincidental and the fateful, Martin creates space for the viewer's imagination, trusting to the audience's visual memories. The race riots of

1992, triggered by the maltreatment of Rodney King; the live television coverage of O. J. Simpson's flight in 1994; or Los Angeles' recurrent earthquakes and firestorms are stored in the public's collective memory, as are popular neo-noir films such as *Blade Runner* (1982), *Dark City* (1998), or *The Matrix* (1999), which unleash dystopian visions of the end of time.

In *Noir*, too, the audience is catapulted into a chaotic, nightmarish situation. But, in dispensing with visuals, viewers are deprived of the opportunity to put scenes in order and test their authenticity. It is up to the viewer to decide if the film is a staged fiction or a snapshot of a fateful event.

1

Debord (1931 – 1994) studied the various possible forms of experimental film. One of his films, *Hurléments en faveur de Sade* (*Howls for Sade*, 1952) consists of a several-minute-long black image without sound. At times, the picture turns white, while political quotes, or quotes from legal statutes are heard.

2

The "subtitles" consist of the original English-language conversation, running in synch with the soundtrack. They reveal the rhythmic structure of the conversation, thus forming an occasionally humorous element, which stands in contrast to the work's otherwise gloomy atmosphere.

3

See Barbara Mennel, *Cities and Cinema*, New York: Routledge, 2008, pp. 22-23.

4

See Hannes Böhringer, *Auf dem Rücken Amerikas: Eine Mythologie der neuen Welt im Western und Gangsterfilm*, Berlin: Merve, 1998.

5

See Paul Werner, *Film Noir und Neo-Noir*, Munich: Vertigo, 2000, p. 13. *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) by John Huston or *Double Indemnity* (1944) by Billy Wilder are classic film noir.

6

See Werner 2000 (see note 5), p. 9.

7

See Georg Seesslen, *Copland. Geschichte und Mythologie des Polizeifilms*, Marburg: Schüren, 1999.