

The Sun Shone Glaringly

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The Sun Shone Glaringly by Seth Lower

The Ice Plant, 2014

80 pages - [Ice Plant](#) / [Amazon](#)

The Sun Shone Glaringly is a photo and text observation of performance on the streets of L.A. After moving to L.A. in 2010, artist Seth Lower began a meditation, pairing images of streets, houses, and aspiring actors with vague noir allusions.

As suggested by the title, the photos are streaked and saturated in the “glaring sun,” depicting “portraits of aspiring actors and photographs of places in Los Angeles that have been inspired by film dialogue and descriptions, as well as total fabrications and personal anecdotes.”

The result is a charming and effective brooding piece. Lower takes advantage of the fertile mixed media essay, recalling classics like, “Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,” or “The Untitled Film Stills Series,” by Cindy Sherman, encouraging readers towards potential cinema/literature. This potential literature, as the space of constant becoming, remains a strong current in avant-gardism today.

The Sun Shone Glaringly can also be paired with Joshua Edward’s terrific *Imperial Nostalgias*, as well as the 2003 documentary film by Thom Anderson: *Los Angeles Plays Itself*. These projects interrogate the way that cinema influences language and imagination, especially in the domination of nostalgia/aesthetics over the experience of everyday working people. Anderson especially challenges the cultural myopia that exists in regard to “Hollywood.” Lower identifies this same myopia, and skewers it using the language of noir.

Lower shows the extent to which cinema bounds language and imagination in contemporary culture. The pure fact that these images correspond so quickly with complete narratives, encouraging us to think twice about these narratives. The narrowing of popular imagination through film is certainly not new news. Recall that famous Žižek line: “It’s easier to imagine the end of all life on earth than a much more modest radical change in *capitalism*,” and all of this is not to say that cinema is terrible, but only that these things have a real impact on the way we end up seeing the world.

In one of the minor observations, Lower shows that age-old truism about L.A. (And everywhere else for that matter!): It’s a city where everyone is something else (Painter, Poet, Filmmaker, etc). The problem is not, of course, the number of aspiring actors, but only really our inability, as working people, to organize and make things better in this life.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LIR9TUcjGrM>

In the most striking aspect of the piece, Lower highlights an essential truth about noir: you can find noir anyplace you look for it.

He writes: "A woman in a blue blazer discusses forced readiness on a huge cell phone."

"Our hero is slowly beginning to remember her past."

"Murphy highjacks a specialized police helicopter and flies it over the Los Angeles river. It won't be the last time."

Noir as a lens, historically the source of its critical capacity (allowing writers like Hammet or Mosley real complexity), is becoming flattened: shadowy Gotham City is just as noir as Kansas City, MO in bright daylight, or a neon-ramen bar in *Blade Runner*, and none of this is very provocative anymore. Something about post-modernity takes the edge off the aesthetic, and to be fair the rise of the detective story with E.A. Poe really marked the beginning of Modernism, so it's probably ok to let noir off the hook, as far as experimental literature is concerned.

However, the Private Investigator as late-capitalist consumer is one of the great, and sad, compelling synchronies in contemporary culture.

That is to say, the construction of the hard-boiled, just (*Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean*, who is neither tarnished nor afraid) vigilante/ noir P.I. corresponds to a narcissistic and anti-communitarian trend in contemporary culture that privileges the exceptional individual (late-capitalist consumer) over all else.

Just as trashy YA miserabilist screeds (*The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*) constantly reimagine dystopia where only YOU can save the world, the P.I. is necessarily individualist. And sure there are some exceptions to this, but as a whole, it's easy to close our eyes and see every single noir trope from Ava Gardner's femme fatale in *The Killers* to Joan Blondell's Zeena Krumbein, the lovely and doomed mentalist's assistant in *Nightmare Alley*.

The reason *The Sun Shone Glaringly* is so compelling is precisely because it problematizes noir. Each shot reminds us that aspiring actors are first and foremost aspiring people, and the narratives we create to rationalize our endeavors always fall short of the movies. There's more than a hint of New Sincerity in Lower's work, reminding us again and again that we deliver pizzas, and yes we should be able to live like humans even as we deliver pizzas and aspire towards art.

Lower's language is playful and interrogative: "King Willy rolls some chicken bones twice on a drum, then waves his hand. Iwo Jima, Cambodia, Beirut."

Parataxis, cut-up, and false-parallels make this a deconstructionist project as Lower breaks the noir city myth down into little pieces, and in those pieces finds everyday people.