SOMEWHERE IN
THE NIGHT

FILM NOIR AND THE AMERICAN CITY

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route through the labyrinth—for he is an oddly vulnerable hybrid of witness and investigator—which concludes with his having his "eyeballs scorched" by a revolver that was fired (at someone else) inches from his face. Having finally cleared himself with the police, his eyes bandaged, he is literally guided back into the night from the police station by the young woman (alternately a Beatrice/Circe figure) who variously led and misled him on his quest through the labyrinth of the city, where, metaphorically, he was blinded by the succession of duplicities and horrors he witnessed.

In each of these films, the hero's relationship to the city carries added poignancy and power because the posthumous eye (or post-mortem consciousness) he casts upon it is so devastating and all-encompassing. Here we have a tour guide to the labyrinth like no other, for the hero has actually traveled to the labyrinth's terrible center, where every street is a one-way street, and "died" to tell about it.

In film, as in the novel, a primary element must always be the manner in which a narrator, or a set of characters in concert, suspends and discloses information: this is what determines the element of suspense, which is the nervous system of the plot. In the whodunit we find one sort of nervous system, often rudimentary, occasionally—and more rewardingly—complex. But film noir relies on many varieties of suspense, with ingenuity and sophistication. In *The Dark Corner* (1946), for example, we are aware early on of all the information we shall need to solve the film's surface mystery; what involves us, suspends us, along a taut parabola from beginning to end, is watching as the hero—stumbling, fumbling, nearly self-destructing—attempts to discover information to which we, at every twist and turn, are already privy. The converse principle, at work in all films noirs with a voice-over—whether of the first or third person—is that the voice-over serves to seal off the action of the film. The disjunction between the voice-over, cool and calm, and the tangled, ongoing, present action of what we see, provides inherent, revelatory, sometimes unbearable, tension. The narrator distances us because he knows the outcome of the story.

While echoing myths that date back to the origins of the first cities (in fact, to the cave complexes of the earliest human habitations) the film noir is an utterly homegrown modern American form.

Its literary antecedents are eclectic: from Jacobean drama to Ibsen and Strindberg, Gothic fiction in Britain to the German Romanticism of Kleist and Buchner. It owes as much to Knut Hamsun's *Hunger*, Dostoevsky's *The Devils*, and Dickens' *Bleak House* as to the hard-boiled suspense stories that Dashiell Hammett, Horace McCoy, and Cornell Woolrich contributed to American pulp magazines such as *Black Mask* in the 1930s. In the United States its roots can be traced most directly to the work of Poe; our first poet of the industrialized, extended city, an avatar of the exotic and the macabre, he was also the inventor of the modern detective story. That he so powerfully influenced Charles Baudelaire, the greatest nineteenth-century urban poet—a specialist, like Rimbaud and Verlaine after him, in the sensual and psychological textures of the nocturnal metropolis—oddly mirrors the explosive impact that the so-called "black films" from America, nearly a century later, had upon the young French film directors of the *nouvelle vague*, or New Wave.

These directors—Francois Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol, Jean-Pierre Melville—in fact popularized the term *film noir* (coined in 1946 by the French critic Nino Frank) which then took some years to make its way back across the Atlantic. The incestuousness of the Franco-American connection ends there, however; by the time the French are shooting their own films noirs in the mid to late fifties, the classic American film noir cycle is nearly completed. The French at that point are fully cognizant of, and influenced by, the films noirs made in the United States, whereas the various American directors of films noirs from 1945 to 1955 have been blissfully unaware that, as a group, they were creating an entirely new genre of film. In fact, the term "film noir" in the 1940s and early 1950s was not at all a familiar one either to American filmmakers or their audiences. (Webster's lists its first English usage as 1958.) Had you told Billy Wilder in 1947 that you admired his latest film noir, he wouldn't have known what you were talking about.

The cinematic antecedents of the film noir comprise a rich stew. The German Expressionist films of the 1930s, and before them the "street films" of the 1920s, are the most powerful influence, in no small measure because many of the directors and assistant directors of those films emigrated to the United States on the eve of the Second World War, settled in Hollywood, and began making films in

English for the major studios. Immediately distinctive, these films utilized revolutionary techniques refined in Berlin and Vienna: moving cameras, severely angled shots, low-key photography, and innovative uses of light and shadow to frame backlot shooting, making the studio-simulated city streets, sidewalks, and rooftops appear more grittily realistic and forbidding than the real thing. Wilder, Maté, Josef von Sternberg, Robert Siodmak, Otto Preminger, Fritz Lang, Max Ophuls, Curtis Bernhardt, William Dieterle, and Charles Vidor are just some of the most prominent members of this group.

Another film noir antecedent is the so-called French poetic realism of the late thirties, especially in its depictions of metropolitan Paris and Marseilles, in the films of Julien Duvivier, Pierre Chenal, and Marcel Carné. It is seldom noted that a number of the German Expressionist directors—Siodmak, Lang, Wilder, Bernhardt, and Ophuls—traveled to Hollywood from Berlin via Paris, and were not only exposed to the poetic realism films, but directed a good many themselves, as did Jacques Tourneur, who made his directorial debut in France after serving his apprenticeship there in the early thirties. And Alfred Hitchcock, heavily indebted to the Germans (it's a little known fact that he directed his first two feature films at studios in Munich in 1925) also came to the United States in 1940, the same year that Orson Welles, with his brilliant Expressionist cinematographer, Gregg Toland, shot *Citizen Kane*. Stylistically and otherwise, with its chiaroscuro lighting, its reliance on a documentary-style, investigative voice-over, and its pioneering, deep-focus long shots, permitting objects in the camera's foreground to be simultaneously as sharply defined as objects in the far background, *Citizen Kane* was profoundly to shape all subsequent films noirs. "In one of G.K. Chesterton's stories," Borges writes, "the hero remarks that nothing is as terrifying as a labyrinth without a center. This film is that labyrinth." At the same time, there is the direct, though deceptive, influence on film noir of its not-so-close cousins, the detective and gangster films—so revered by Borges—which have reached their apex after bursting onto the American scene in the 1930s.

Yet another wellspring of the film noir is postwar Italian Neo-Realism—the naturalistic, dirt-under-your-nails, quasi-documentary films of Vittorio De Sica, Roberto Rosselini, and Luchino Visconti that demonstrated the heightened impact of dramatic material

filmed in urban locales. This technique was often emulated in noir films such as *Call Northside 777* in which the voice-over narrator solemnly announces that the film was shot at the "actual sites" of the events being depicted. Ironically, urban location shooting after 1945 became more popular and aesthetically effective because of photographic methods perfected during the war in effecting the aerial reconnaissance of cities that were to be bombed.

Lastly, there is the seminal contribution which the urban paintings of Charles Sheeler, Edward Hopper, Franz Kline, George Bellows, Martin Lewis, Reginald Marsh, John Sloan, and Georgia O'Keeffe made to the visual underpinnings of film noir: its intensely luminous detail, jagged perspectives, vertiginous heights, hallucinatory geometry, and bold compositional methods. Nicholas Ray's *Party Girl* opens with an actual painting behind the credits, a facsimile of the skyscraper in O'Keeffe's "Night City." And when Abraham Polonsky, the director of *Force of Evil*, was dissatisfied with the look his cinematographer, George Barnes, was getting, he took him to an exhibition of Hopper's paintings at a Greenwich Village gallery and said, "This is how I want the picture to look." And it did: full of black windows, looming shadows, and rich pools of light pouring from recessed doorways and steep stairwells.

Hopper was himself a lifetime moviegoer, constantly influenced by, and eventually, in turn, influencing, American films. Well aware of his symbiotic relationship to the movies, he was open in his admiration of their painterly ability to crystallize in a single flickering image the essence of an entire lifetime or of an epiphanic, otherwise ephemeral, moment frozen in time. These were exactly the sorts of images (and Hopper is one of the great masters of rendering urban light and shadow to the point of tactility, with exquisite textures) he conjured up on canvas throughout his career. One of Hopper's earliest jobs, in the years he supported himself as an illustrator, was to design posters for silent films—primarily gangster potboilers—which he was paid to watch and then interpret in a single graphic image. Later, his complex, resonant cityscapes provided an elemental grab bag for art directors and set designers, and in the summer of 1995, in conjunction with a show called "Edward Hopper and the American Imagination," the Whitney Museum in New York screened an extraordinary series of films "influenced by Hopper's

work" entitled "Edward Hopper and the American Cinema," which included such classic films noirs as *Laura* and *Night and the City* and *Blow-Up*, directed respectively by Godard and Michelangelo Antonioni, a number of European films, including *Masculin-Féminin* and *Blow-Up*, directed respectively by Godard and Michelangelo Antonioni, that draw heavily on American film noir.

But beyond these various influences, the startling and resonant elements of myth in which the film noir is steeped must be noted.

The city as labyrinth is key to entering the psychological and aesthetic framework of the film noir. As the German historian Oswald Spengler wrote in *The Decline of the West*, speaking of the megalopolis or "world-city" of the twentieth century: "The city is a world, is *the* world." He went on to characterize twentieth-century man as one who "is seized and possessed by his own creation, the City, and is made into its creation, its executive organ, and finally its victim." The city as a closed system. A beast with a life of its own, into whose guts the hero's quest is undertaken.

[The city is a labyrinth of human construction, as intricate in its steel, glass, and stone as the millions of webs of human relationships suspended within its confines. It is a projection of the human imagination, and also a reflection of its inhabitants' inner lives; and this is a constant theme—really, a premise—of the film noir. In these films, the framing of the city, our visual progression through the labyrinth, is as significant an element as plot or characterization. [The oblique lighting and camera-angling referred to, in both studio and location scenes (especially the night-for-night shoots), reinforce our implicit understanding that the characters' motives are furtive, ambiguous, and psychologically charged; that their innermost conflicts and desires are rooted in urban claustrophobia and stasis; and that they tread a shadowy borderline between repressed violence and outright vulnerability. Hence the obsessive emphasis on urban settings that are precarious and dangerous: rooftops, walkways on bridges, railroad tracks, high windows, ledges, towering public monuments (a Hitchcock favorite), unlit alleys, and industrial zones, not to mention moving trains and cars.]

The dictionary's definitions of "labyrinth" all strike home for us: 1. a place constructed or full of intricate passageways and blind alleys; 2. a tortuous, entangled, or inextricable condition of things, events, ideas, etc.; an entanglement, a maze; 3. a tortuous anatomical struc-

ture. For the concept of the labyrinth operates on three corresponding and interlocking levels in the film noir:

First, the actual physical maze of the city: streets, sidewalks, bridges, automobile and subway tunnels, underpasses, docks and piers, airport runways and, in the postwar years, the expressways that crisscross (and ultimately fragment) the metropolis, and the highways that radiate from its noisy heart, like arteries, and disappear into the misty, silent, nonurban darkness. A maze of relatively few square miles, it is packed with millions of unique warrens: office buildings, apartment houses, department stores, and tenements; warehouses, hospitals, prisons, and parking garages; casinos, nightclubs, cafés, and bars; museums, theaters, concert halls, and galleries; train and bus terminals, stadiums, and even factories and refineries on the fringes of the city limits.

Second, the labyrinth that is, in the broadest terms, the human condition or situation in which the characters intersect and interact in the city, a labyrinth constructed of plot twists and stratagems, metaphysical conundrums, or bewildering and inscrutable enmeshments of time, space, and chance. A set of conditions that produces amazement.

And, finally, the labyrinth of the hero's inner workings—mental and physiological—subjected to brutal stresses and strains that mercilessly reveal his flaws. His anatomy is a kind of corollary to, and reflection of, the city's inner workings, in all their rich complexity. And when we speak of the workings of a city, the catalogue seems as if it must be endless. There is organized crime, social conditions at once fluctuating and polarized, the ebb and flow (and muck and mire) of politics and finance, ethnic clashes, cultural crosscurrents (and shocks), a Babel of languages and all their permutations (from street talk to salon niceties), and a psychic atmosphere in which night-mares and dreams, the fantastic and the mundane, collide at every turn. And, perhaps most elementally—organically—there is the way the city literally works, in terms of sewers, water mains, gas pipes, electrical and telephone cables (all subterranean), as well as the processes by which fuel, food, and other goods are supplied it from the outside, the other world, that cloaked, silent countryside beyond the suburbs that might as well be on another planet.

In film noir, the hero's penetration of the external labyrinth, the

city, mirrors—often through a funhouse mirror—the transforming path he follows along his internal labyrinth. The farther outside himself he goes, the deeper he may find himself to be on the inside. Until inside and outside merge. If not his moment of epiphany, this certainly becomes ours, as witnesses.

"Labyrinth" derives from a pre-Hellenic, Lydian word, *labrys*, meaning "double-headed axe," which was an emblem of sovereignty in Minoan Crete, shaped like a waxing and waning moon fused together back to back and symbolizing the moon goddess' creative as well as destructive powers. In ancient Crete, as in Babylon (and other places as far-flung as Wales and Siberia), the labyrinth's maze and spiral configurations were directly associated with the internal organs of the human anatomy and the spiritual underworld, the one seen to be a microcosm of the other. The earliest labyrinths are associated, always, with the underworld, often called "The Land of the Dead."

In the labyrinth mythology of ancient Australia, a man must enter the maze to dance (paralleling the labyrinth at Knossus in Crete which was originally organized around a ritual dancing-pattern marked out in mosaic on the pavement, a line of girls leading a line of boys along a complicated series of spirals). The man's journey, undertaken at a critical point in his life, often as a spiritual test, is always related to death and rebirth. And the presiding personage at the labyrinth, who leads him into it, is always a woman, often veiled. The labyrinth consists of multiple spirals and concentric circles (resembling, among other things, both human intestines and the stellar swirls of the Milky Way) that serve *illusory* and *deceptive* functions. The latter adjectives, as becomes clear, are verbal touchstones of the film noir city. Also, as James Hillman has written of the ancient Greeks in *The Dream of the Underworld*, "Entering the underworld" refers to a transition from the material to the psychical point of view. Three dimensions become two as the perspective of nature, flesh, and matter fall away, leaving an existence of immaterial, mirrorlike images, *eidola*." Which could also serve as a definition of film.

Hillman stresses the "shadowy or shade aspect of the underworld." *Skia*, he says, "was another word the Greek imagination used for underworld figures. The persons there are shades. So, we must imagine a world without light in which shadows move." Per-

haps surprisingly, yet another such word is "hero," for according to Hillman, "the hero was actually an underworld figure . . . even the term *heros* has been considered 'chthonian' . . . denoting a power of the lower world." He goes on to specify that the underworld is "the mythological style of describing a psychological cosmos. Put more bluntly: underworld is psyche. When we use the word *underworld*, we are referring to a wholly psychic perspective. . . . To know the psyche at its basic depths . . . one must go to the underworld. . . . It is in the light of the psyche that we must read all underworld descriptions." He writes that "underworld fantasies and anxieties" and "underworld images" are all to be seen as "movements towards this realm of death, whether they be fantasies of decay, images of sickness in dreams, repetitive compulsions, or suicidal impulses. . . ." And this could easily serve as a functioning definition of the film noir, in which the hero's descent into the labyrinth of the city inevitably parallels (indeed, *is*) a descent into the self.

On the Melanesian island of Malekula in the New Hebrides, near Fiji, a woman similar to the one in Australian mythology, known as a female guardian, draws an elaborate blueprint of the labyrinth in the sand before the cavernous entrance to the underworld. When the soul of the man who seeks to enter it arrives, the woman erases half of the blueprint and the man must know how to recreate it exactly with a stick or wand before she permits him entrance to the cavern. Similarly, at the cavern-entrance to the underworld in Virgil's *Aeneid*, Aeneas finds a diagram of the Cretan labyrinth engraved upon the rockface. According to the classicist W.F. Jackson Knight, who places "circular and labyrinthine movement" among the *Aeneid*'s most recurrent images, the very wanderings of heroes like Aeneas and Odysseus, emanating from Troy (whose name itself can mean "the wanderings of a maze") are symbolical labyrinths, projected onto a largely hostile world. Virgil also envisioned Rome as a twofold city, using the oddly grafted metaphors of beehive (the harmonious golden city) and labyrinth (the subterranean, unsymmetrical, shadow city). When specifically applied to the underworld, Knight goes on, Virgil's conception of the labyrinth is "the very picture of restraint, obstruction, and bewilderment" for the descending hero. Pliny the Elder, in writing of the oldest labyrinth in the West (fourth century B.C.) at Heracleopolis, paints a more terrifying pic-

ture of the labyrinth as a baffling, treacherous, nocturnal city in miniature, filled with dead-ends, fake doors, trap-passageways, and fierce images of gods and monsters, a place always in darkness, with halls so constructed that when their doors were opened, a spine-chilling rumble of thunder greeted the visitor. Mircea Eliade in turn has described the labyrinth of prehistoric times as "a theater of initiation"—a place where lost souls wander blindfolded in the company of a veiled woman in a phantom-life on the other side of the mirror of this life. In Hawaiian mythology, such souls are said to tumble from the tree of life and free-fall for many nights before they land in the great labyrinth that leads to the underworld.

In writing of maze symbolism, Knight observes that in the labyrinth "the overcoming of difficulties by the hero frequently precedes union with some hidden princess." Labyrinths, as galleries of stone, are in fact still the staging grounds, as they have been since ancient times, for "a game or race in which boys compete to rescue a girl from the center of a maze." The film noir often takes these conditions and gives them an ironic spin, imposing destruction upon the hero rather than union, and allowing him to think he is rescuing a woman who in truth is not only in control of the situation, but is imperiling his own life. This hero, the film critic Richard Dyer writes, "has the double quest of the film noir—to solve the mystery of the villain and of the woman."

In every labyrinth, as in every film noir, a woman plays a critical role. When she is a Beatrice-type, she is almost too good to be true. Nurturing to a fault, loyal beyond the bounds of common sense, she is like the faithful guide who appears suddenly in a nightmare, or in the "dark wood" in which Dante found himself. As the Greek scholar E.R. Dodds points out, "The very word *oneiros* in Homer nearly always means dream-figure, not dream-experience." When the chips are down, this Beatrice can be wily and ingenious, or so pure-minded as to be rendered nearly powerless in the Hobbesian moral grid of the film noir. For this, perversely, she often provokes us to anger, even contempt. When she is a Circe, or spider woman, on the other hand, we may find ourselves admiring her; for then she is indeed powerful, dangerously so from a male point of view. And her power and intelligence, though presented in terms of destructive potential, are always fueled by her sexuality. As in *Out of the Past*, sexuality is

an *active*, high-octane force—as active as a man's, if not more so—and this is a revolutionary phenomenon in American cinema, a bridge to the more liberated women of later films whose power, sexual and otherwise, is also presented in the service of nondestructive urges.

So the spider woman of the film noir is a formidable personage. Freud tells us that spiders can inspire a deep, primal (and castrating) fear in men, and that the spiral web, in many cultures, is a fear-releasing (and female) sign. Hillman writes that "spider images have generally been woven into a great mother web of spinning illusions (*Maya*), paranoid plots, poisonous gossip, and entrapping. . . ." The spiral of the spider's web mimics the spiral of the labyrinth. The density of the web reflects the complex circumstances into which the hero is plunged, and then manipulated. Is there a thread for every labyrinth, tenuously laying out an escape route, like the thread Ariadne left for Theseus at Knossus?

That is one of the central questions at the heart of *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), which is perhaps the most perfectly realized film noir ever made. Directed by Robert Aldrich, it is a symbol-laden, absolutely pivotal film noir (the film encyclopedist Steven H. Scheuer has called it "the apotheosis" of the classic noir cycle). Certainly it is the most intricate textually. Produced just eight years after *Out of the Past*, it feels light-years removed, and inevitably jolts first-time audiences, including those who have seen a great many other films noirs.

Employing complementary elements of myth and plot with great intensity and perhaps unrivaled technical brilliance (on this level alone, it is one of the masterpieces of American cinema), it offers us the most definitive statement of the noir ethos and the most delirious depiction of the great American city in all of film noir. Now it is not just a given city on a given night but an entire urban civilization that seems to be unraveling faster than the mind can comprehend—a collective nervous breakdown observed at fast speed. A society at once barbaric and overly refined devouring itself. Premeditated murder has given way to spontaneous sadism; individual paranoia to general anarchy; the prospect of a lifetime jail sentence to the numbing terror of nuclear holocaust. As in the San Francisco of *Out of the Past*, the Los Angeles in *Kiss Me Deadly* is a city without pedestrians; instead, the newly constructed postwar freeways and the broad boule-