cities as centers of wealth on the European scale, the cities "would be infinitely larger and infinitely more infernal."

But let's hear what some of the citizens of the noir city have to say for themselves about money, for which they have a slew of epithets, from dough, lettuce, and cabbage to moolah, juice, and scratch:

"Money. You know what that is. The stuff you never have enough of. Little green things with George Washington's picture that men slave for, commit crimes for, die for. It's the stuff that has caused more trouble in the world than anything else ever invented. Simply because there's too little of it." *(Detour)*

"To me a dollar was a dollar in any language." *(Gilda)*

"Every extra buck has a meaning all its own." *(Pickup on South Street)*

"You'll never make money, you're a two-bit guy." *(Gun Crazy)*

"Love rather than money is the root of all evil." *(Conflict)*

"He left me with two things: debts and beautiful memories." *(The Sleeping City)*

"Is that you . . . that nice expensive smell?" *(Murder, My Sweet)*

"What was it I asked myself—a piece of paper crawling with germs." *(Detour)*

"Money isn't dirty, just people." *(Pushover)*

Yes, and maybe money can clean them up.

Kenneth Rexroth, the poet and critic, made the astounding observation that in Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, published in 1720, there is not a single page on which some reference to money, in one form or another, large or small—sums, transactions, negotiations, reckonings—is not made. In a novel usually categorized as "lusty" or "bawdy," its heroine's name a synonym for licentiousness, the narrative—her story—is truly driven, not by sex, but hard cash. As Rexroth asserts, Defoe presents us with the "most authentic portrait of a prostitute" in English literature superimposed upon a scathingly detailed critique of capitalist morality—"the morality of the complete whore and that of the new middle class, which was rising around him." The world of Defoe's novel is mercantile London, a city about which the author possessed a unique understanding, for in his own life he was both a wildly successful businessman and an abject debtor. Defoe's London, according to Rexroth, is a place in which "all values are reduced to price and all morality to the profitable. Love is

replaced by mutually profitable contractual relationships, which are worked out in actuarial detail even when they are illegal. Money is not something with which to buy sex and other sensual gratifications; on the contrary, sex is something to be bartered with shrewdness for as much money as it will bring."

While it is only one aspect of the noir city, where passion, lust, and love certainly thrive on their own terms and with their own dark permutations, the monetary ethos of Defoe's London—and its manifestations in human affairs: greed, covetousness, duplicity, self-delusion, and so on—certainly finds a home in film noir. Power equals Money equals Power is one bit of urban algebra that the noir city's population seems to know by rote. Money, the lifeblood of the city, is necessarily a central issue in all noir films, whether they be preoccupied with crimes of the streets or of the heart. The themes around money vary, from the hardscrabble plight of the urban poor, to the ascendent (or, increasingly, descendent) material preoccupations of the middle class, to the moral and financial imbroglios of the rich, but, as in *Moll Flanders,* the emphasis remains constant.

In post-Depression America, the noir city mirrors both the corrosive and the liberating influences of money on the society at large. In the city, in circular fashion, "currency" indeed means both the money supply and "the quality or state of being current" (Webster's), as in "being prevalent at the moment," that is, "dominant"—as in how much clout does one credibly wield. Backed up by what assets, how much cash, and—not to be diminished—what status symbols. When you go up or down the scale—*do, re, mi* or *do, ti, la*—you always end up back at *do.* This notion is reinforced daily in the city by the rough and tumble exigencies of making a living, perchance even *thriving,* and by the daily onslaught of advertising, public relations, and all the other effluvia of the entertainment industry which, with their thousands of direct or subliminal inducements to mass consumerism and a mass (anesthetized) sensibility, serve as satellites to the fixed constellation of power, status, and wealth.

Advertising, especially, has a volatile and dislocating influence in the postwar years when it leaps from billboards and radiowaves onto the far more powerful, and insidious, television screen. Using pseudo-art and other tools of deception, like sports personalities and other celebrities who clearly have no use for the product they are

hawking (the aerobically taut model puffing a cigarette, the millionaire boxer shilling for a roach-killer company), advertising in its postwar boom becomes a scrambler of daily life: selling what is useless, harmful, or unaffordable, glamorizing the mundane, making *itself* a staple of modern life while diminishing the real staples of human sustenance, material as well as spiritual. As McLuhan notes: "The advertising industry is a crude attempt to extend the principles of automation to every aspect of society," so that, "instead of presenting a private argument or vista, it offers a way of life that is for everybody or nobody." It is a truism that advertising incites you to acquire what you don't need—to fill your life, literally, with everything money can buy, even if it is on credit, with back-breaking interest.

For long stretches in film noir it is not difficult to imagine the city as a sea of money, with currents, crosscurrents, and undercurrents, amazing depths and the barest shallows, safe harbors for the affluent, treacherous reefs to decimate the poor, and a whole range of ebbs and flows, tempests and tidal waves, predictable and otherwise, for everyone in between.

In the noir city, art works are frequently used to indicate the privileged financial lives of their owners. Objets d'art are often backdropped by a window that showcases the twinkling, diamond lights of the cityscape, which is meant to highlight the fact that the art works are emblems of the treasures the city has to offer. These treasures can take many forms: precious coins *(The Brasher Doubloon);* priceless jade *(Murder, My Sweet);* rare books *(The Big Sleep);* and exotic Native American artifacts *(The Leopard Man).* Often, prized collections of gems, coins, stamps, or rare bric-a-brac are caressed and manipulated by their owners in the same way he or she caresses and manipulates people. For example, in *Sweet Smell of Success* the paintings, tapestries, and statuary strewn around a lavish penthouse mean no more to their owner, a ruthless public relations maven, than the gaudier emblems of his wealth—cars, personal jewelry, expensive liquor—and maybe even less; "I don't even like the stuff," he assures a visitor, nodding toward the Cezanne that adorns the wall over his fireplace.

The noir city is full of high art and its imitations—the real thing, that is, and the flotsam and jetsam of kitsch which wash up on our

shores. Kitsch, in fact—not just imitations, but blatantly exploitative, low quality art and the ever-evolving art of forgery—is a high-growth industry in the postwar city. Fine art as a status symbol for the nouveau riche is still an emergent phenomenon in the postwar years, and a suspect one at that, in light of the United States' long-standing (still evident) anti-intellectualism, nativist tendencies, and general distrust of the artist and his productions. Artistic influences from abroad are often treated with hostility in film noir—as malignant influences. During the McCarthy era, the McCarran Act, which could block practically any foreign visitor from entering the United States on "political grounds," was invoked in alarming frequency to deny visas to writers, painters, and musicians. Artists in film noir are routinely presented as dangerous subversives or disgruntled radicals—though they rarely seem to be driven by coherent political philosophies. Notions of "radicalism" or "foreign influences" aside, in the films the presentation of art boils down to the following: the viability of art for the masses; the democratization of art appreciation (after liberating the Europeans from the forces of their own barbarism in the war, some of the films imply, why should Americans, especially those Americans who fought the war, feel less worthy than a Frenchman, much less a German or Italian, to enjoy the highbrow arts of those countries?); art as a sophisticated means of social climbing (through the knowledge, or acquisition, of art works); and art as an educational tool or recreational device.

More intimately fascinating than the implications of private acquistion and public appreciation of art works is the series of women's portraits, painted by highly skilled professional artists—sometimes even inspired ones—that runs through film noir. Often these paintings take on lives of their own, as important as the characters they depict. In *Laura,* for example, the heroine's portrait dominates her apartment; when she is believed to be dead, the portrait haunts the other characters, infuses their dreams, gazes down on them reproachfully, and even determines the course of the plot. Then, when Laura reappears alive, she somehow pales beside the portrait, which remains a more dominant image than the woman herself. The film's principal male characters are her two lovers; the first, whom she spurns, is her would-be murderer; the second, whom she embraces, is the investigating detective. Both men invest the portrait with fantasties and visions to which Laura refuses to conform upon her return. And it is at that point that the film's greatest turmoil begins; even after the climax, in the final shot of the film, the camera comes to rest, not on Laura herself, but on her portrait. In *Night and the City,* Helen Nosseross is coldly ambitious, destructive, and scornful of her husband, but he keeps an idealized portrait of her over his desk which he gazes at longingly, and lovingly, especially at the times of greatest stress in their marriage. In *The Blue Dahlia,* the glowing, smiling portrait of the hero's unfaithful, dissipated wife is central to the plot; folded into the back of its frame is a posthumous message which, after her murder, changes the course of the hero's life. And in *The Big Heat,* Mike Lagana, the immensely wealthy racketeer who has an entire city under his thumb, keeps a huge, idealized portrait of his mother in his home library, behind the desk from which he directs his crime empire.

Lagana's library is also filled with statuary and objets d'art, just as Laura's apartment is. In fact, in *Laura,* Otto Preminger spends a good deal of time panning across a series of immaculate glass shelves (the film opens with such a pan) filled with objets d'art in an elegant, coolly lit alcove of a very expensive New York apartment. Similarly, when we are introduced to her spurned lover, the radio personality, renowned columnist, and wealthy raconteur Waldo Lydecker (who writes, he informs us, "with a pen dipped in poison"), Lydecker takes us—remaining off-camera while the camera pans his opulent digs—on a tour of his apartment, past paintings under glass, ivory statuettes, and "rare Chinese porcelains of the Sung Dynasty," which concludes in his Roman-sized bathroom where we find him (on-camera finally) reclining in a huge marble tub with a marble shelf across the middle where he is rattling off his daily column on a typewriter. There is a cup of oolong tea in a delicate cup (antique, of course) beside the typewriter, and from the corner his voice suddenly pipes up on the radio, declaiming the column he wrote (in that very tub) the previous day. Lydecker and Laura lead privileged lives, financially and socially, and the art works they possess are constantly in view, and handled throughout the film, to remind us of this fact.

Crack-Up is a key film in the noir cycle with regard to the themes of art and money. The film itself—visually—is highly stylized. Much

of it is shot at the Metropolitan Museum in Manhattan. The hero, George Steele, is a vocal proponent of art for the masses—he wants to open up the museum to the people. (His heart may be in the right place, but he is also one of those film noir characters who feels he must go out of his way to denigrate any and all examples of abstract expressionism; if it isn't representational, it's open to ridicule, he tiredly insists.) Pitted against Steele and his egalitarian efforts is a group of powerful collectors who are replacing masterpieces with forgeries and hoarding the originals or "renting them out" for profit. (During the war, Steele used his skills as an art detective to turn up Nazi forgeries—also created, by the Nazi brass, for hoarding or profit.) The process by which these forgeries are created, called "narcosynthesis," is also a byproduct of atomic research during the war—an abuse of the very same technology used to create the atomic bomb. And the means by which Steele exposes the forgeries is the X ray—a technique he developed and patented during the war. Both techniques, then—the one used to produce forgeries and the other to expose them—are radioactive, and both are linked to the war. And there is the obvious parallel between the forgery gang's methods (they're willing to kidnap, torture, and kill adversaries) and the Nazis', whose methods and ethos, it is implied once again, survive the war. Even in this film, shot between December 1945 and February 1946, within six months of Hiroshima—a film ostensibly about art and corruption among a sophisticated urban elite whose ringleader is a crooked psychiatrist (like Dr. Soberin in *Kiss Me Deadly*)—the themes of the war's cataclysmic end and the moral bankruptcy underlying the Atomic Age are lurking just beneath the surface.

Of course, one unshakable axiom in film noir, as in so-called real life, is that crime pays. Not all the time, but enough of the time so that it continues to be a worthwhile pursuit, with its own highly specialized professional class. Confidence men, embezzlers, and extortionists, thieves and fences, hijackers and safecrackers are all staples of the noir city. As are crooked lawyers, bribed inspectors, cops on the take, corrupt union bosses, and amoral tycoons.

But first and foremost there are the racketeers. They comprise the core of the criminal population, which is a highly liquid one; in film noir, despite the apparently black-and-white issues of guilt and

innocence that abound, the line between criminals and honest citizens can remain considerably blurred. Racketeering (the word enters the language in 1928) in all its forms is a flourishing urban industry in the postwar years. And the ties between criminal racketeering and political corruption become inextricable; the rackets are a pervasive force, eventually a kind of shadow government. Crime is the iron skeleton camouflaged beneath the outer tissue (which grows ever thinner) of the city's body politic, and its major components are loansharking, protection, gambling, prostitution, counterfeiting, narcotics, and—the spine itself—murder, for hire and/or intimidation. All of these criminal pursuits after 1945 are organized around corporate business concepts; notably, the corporate pyramid, at the peak of which are white-collar managers with their legal mouthpieces and accountants and at the base street soldiers, enforcers, and runners. Money-laundering, instituting "legitimate" business covers, the absorption of political parties from the district clubhouse upward, and methods of creative bookkeeping are all practiced with increasing sophistication.

Like the casino and nightclub owners, but usually on a grander scale, the big-city crime bosses invariably live behind screens of respectability (the word becomes a mantra for such characters in film noir), their personal lawyers subcontracting to corporate law firms, their businesses endowing philanthropies, and their political influence inevitably edging them farther into the city's social mainstream. And also like the nightclub owners, they often have wives who do charity work and kids who attend private schools, and they acquire country houses and blue-chip investment portfolios which can make them appear indistinguishable from the businessmen who are their financial peers. But these men do not prowl the mezzanines of nightclubs: they remain out of the public eye, well behind the scenes, pressing other men's buttons from afar. The fear they have instilled is institutionalized, and their authority is unquestioned. A few of their exemplars are Lagana in *The Big Heat,* Sid Kubik in *The Brothers Rico* (1957), and Conners (no first name) in *Underworld U.S.A.* (1961). Lagana is presented, in smoking jacket and ascot, prowling the library of a mansion out of *Town and Country* and overseeing a black-tie prom party his daughter is throwing; we first meet Kubik, wearing a blue blazer and white ducks, on his way to his

yacht that sleeps twenty plus crew for a day of deep-sea fishing off the Florida coast; and Conners is shown in his enormous natatorium perusing *The Wall Street Journal,* sipping fresh orange juice, and puffing on a corona at poolside with his butler poised nearby in the shadows.

In the descending tiers beneath these top dogs, however, the lieutenants and soldiers of crime organizations project an entirely different image. No prom parties, no swimming, and their activities around deep water do not include casting for marlin. Murder Inc., the Prohibition- and war-enriched Mafia, and the up-and-coming Tong triads in American Chinatowns which are celebrated in the tabloids, like Dillinger and Capone before them, feed into the film noir. In the films, a patina of glamour and cultish sensationalism is overlaid upon the raw brutality of these groups, producing an exotica of gangland violence which becomes part of the mythology of the noir city. We quickly find an incestuous relationship developing between films and the "real life" of the underworld. So that in the 1940s and 1950s, urban gangsters like the Anastasio brothers, who run Murder Inc., admit with pride that they picked up personal eccentricities of dress—white gloves, sunglasses, diamond tie pins—from film racketeers; and many actors portraying the latter (George Raft, Lawrence Tierney, Franchot Tone), in turn admit that they built their screen personas around real-life racketeers they knew personally.

Colin McArthur writes: "The gangster film which forms the watershed between the Forties and Fifties is *Murder Inc.* (1951). It bears many of the marks of the semidocumentary film—based on actual events, location photography, emphasis on the mechanics of investigation, large numbers of unknown players—but it also sounds for the first time the dominant note of the Fifties gangster film, the existence of a nationwide criminal organization." Nationwide, city by city. For it is always a city, often an entire city, money-corrupted from top to bottom, which is set forth in film noir as an island of amorality adrift somewhere in the greater U.S.A. (Never mind that the neighboring city, one hundred miles down the turnpike, may be equally corrupted.)

In addition to *The Big Heat,* films such as *The Big Combo* (1955), *Kansas City Confidential* (1952), *The Phenix City Story* (1955), and

The Captive City (1952) offer up such cities, utterly in thrall to corrupt, parasitical political machines which are limp appendages to organized crime. The two latter films take this formula to almost fantastical lengths: their respective cities seem to have been infiltrated, invaded, and annexed by a hostile external force. If this sounds like war, it's because both cities look and feel very much like war zones. And both films go well beyond standard docudrama fare into the realm of outright exposé.

In 1955, Phenix City, Alabama—it's a real place, and the entire film was made on location—is a city completely controlled by a gambling syndicate. The downtown has gone honky-tonk, with gambling houses, bars, and girlie parlors—there's not a luncheonette or drugstore in sight. The townspeople are presented in a state of debasement and fear, either working for the syndicate or cowed by it into silence. In fact, the film opens with a basso profundo narrator directing a tour of the town's "factories," where "workers" who look like they could blend in with the citizenry of any small city in the United States, are marking decks of cards, rigging slot machines, and loading dice. It is strongly implied that the powers that be in state government are the true overseers of the gambling syndicate, and the film ends on a note of hopelessness and despair, despite a small-scale victory by the single honest man in town, a crusading attorney.

Kennington, the "nice town" which could be "anywhere in America" in *The Captive City,* has none of the garish veneer of Phenix City: all of that has been pushed neatly underground, and on the surface—streets and parks immaculate to the point of sterility in bright light—it resembles a kind of moral ghost town, with phantom citizens going through the motions, equivocating, lying to themselves, or fixing themselves in a state of happy oblivion in order to get by. In this film, there is also a Diogenes—the editor of the local newspaper—stumbling about in the dangerous night, trying to shake things up. We first see him driving at breakneck speed along a highway with his wife grimly beside him, fleeing for his life, and then holing up in a small town in order to dictate the details of Kennington's corruption (a pathology report that seems endless) into a reel-to-reel tape recorder. This scene is preceded by a stiff-necked speech on organized crime in America by none other than Senator Estes Kefauver of Tennessee, a hero of the time for chairing a commission that

bore his name and that first brought the names "Mafia" and "Cosa Nostra" into the American consciousness. Kefauver also delivered an upbeat polemical postscript at the end of the film, which in retrospect feels hopelessly inadequate; if the iron-fisted, nearly totalitarian control that the mob so easily imposed upon Kennington is a barometer, the political infrastructures of American cities after the war were in far more dire straits than Kefauver let on. *The Captive City* is the most claustrophobic of films noirs about "occupied" cities—that is, a nameless, ostensibly upright American city which beneath its placid, orderly surface is found to a be a chaotic, venomous, criminalized environment, from the Chamber of Commerce to City Hall. And how ironic it is in the postwar years to think of American cities, never occupied during the war, as occupied afterward, the occupier a criminal class that prospered—as illustrated by Martinelli and his associates in *Dead Reckoning*—while most of its later victims, the occupied, were engaged in the struggle against the Axis powers.

In film noir, we see over and over again that political corruption in the city invariably goes hand-in-hand with criminal power. From the Depression onward, graft becomes increasingly embedded, with increasing complexity, in urban culture. Earlier on, in 1870, at the zenith of Tammany Hall's power in New York City, Boss Tweed's urban plundering was remarkably simple: everyone who worked for the city padded his bill—first by ten percent, then sixty-six percent, and finally eighty-five percent. Tweed then skimmed the padding. Prefiguring later municipal and Pentagon scandals, in Tweed's New York forty chairs and three tables, purchased from political cronies, cost the city $179,000, and a single thermometer went for $7,500—in 1870 dollars. In the noir city, the enmeshment of politics and crime—shady contracts, rigged bidding, under-the-table payola, doctored books—is more surreptitiously executed. The corrupt political machine, unlike an outright criminal gang, has evolved: now it runs the city through the latter's institutionalized organs of government. It controls the entire civic nervous system, including—especially—the police. It is, by definition, systemic—a large-scale reflection of the cancers of angst and fear afflicting the postwar urban populace.

Even the well-worn, too-often-screened Christmas classic, *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), directed by that celebrant of Norman Rockwell's America, Frank Capra, contains powerful noir elements. It is essentially an upbeat drama-fantasy that happened to be produced in the midst of the film noir era. Capra, like John Ford, was a native-born American director who, as McArthur points out, had a "more buoyant vision" than the German and Austrian immigrants like Lang, Wilder, and Siodmak who, after witnessing the disintegration of Europe after the First World War, were much more "sour and pessimistic" behind the camera. Yet at the center of *It's a Wonderful Life,* like a black hole, is the very image of the noir city: in a long, dream-like sequence, the hero glimpses a place called "Pottersville" (named after the film's villain, an avaricious banker who delights in foreclosures, it sounds like "potter's field"), which underlies the bucolic, wholesome, supposedly "actual" generic American city, Bedford Falls. The latter would have devolved into Pottersville had certain hypothetical events occurred—namely, the hero's suicide, whose aftereffects would have rippled into dozens of lives. And as the hero envisions this hypothetical Pottersville, it has become a thoroughly corrupt, depraved city: the noir vision carried to its limits.

A hyperbolic noir metropolis, Pottersville bears a passing resemblance to Phenix City, but would stand out for its grotesqueness in even the grittiest films noirs. Flashing neon is lighting up the night, and the blare of honky-tonk music fills the air. Violence, gambling, and public drunkenness dominate the streets, literally at every turn. Traffic laws are ignored. A hit-and-run victim is left to bleed in the street. An angry rabble crowds the street corners. Anxiety, cruelty, and fear strain the faces we glimpse in harsh light. Main Street is a strip of garish, seedy nightspots where prostitution is conducted openly and sexual assault is tolerated. Crooked cops, pimps, and criminals strut about with easy authority. The few "respectable" citizens left are objects of derision, fearful for their lives. This entire concoction is fantastical, but it feels real to us because, like much hyperbole of the aesthetic variety, it is not that far removed from our true, our worldly, knowledge of what is the norm. And therein lies its revelatory tension. For even in a holiday fantasy film, we see reinforced the noir theme that every city is really a tale of two cities, always, one underlying the other.

Charles Baudelaire and the other French Symbolists, inventing a

language of hyperreality, are imaginative pioneers in defining the modern city as it was shaped by the Industrial Revolution. In speaking of Baudelaire's great sequence of urban poems, McLuhan writes: "Baudelaire originally intended to call his *Fleurs du Mal, Les Limbes*, having in mind the city as corporate extensions of our physical organs. Our letting go of ourselves, self-alienations, as it were, in order to amplify or increase the power of various functions, Baudelaire considered to be flowers of the growths of evil. The city as amplification of human lusts and sensual striving had for him an entire organic and psychic unity." And this is exactly the sort of unity we find in the film noir's depiction of the corrupt and unhealthy city: it is an extension and reflection of the corruption and sickness of its inhabitants. Again in these films, the city itself can be seen as a character, in the way of a metaphorical human giant—as with Joyce's Dublin in *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake* or Italo Calvino's Venice in *Invisible Cities*.

With regard to wholesale political corruption, graft, and racketeering—with cities so sick as to be on the verge of moral implosion—two particularly notable films are *The Racket* (1951) and *The Street With No Name* (1948).

The Racket was directed by John Cromwell from a much-doctored screenplay, originally written by Sam Fuller. Howard Hughes produced it, with an obsessiveness bordering on mania, and vast, ill-advised, infusions of cash. The film's principal characters are a precocious police captain and a high-ranking mobster. Played by two noir icons, Robert Mitchum and Robert Ryan, the police captain, McQuigg (he is never addressed by his first name in the film), and the mobster, Nick Scanlon, are at odds from the first. Though Scanlon is more superficially coarse and brutal, the two men could be mirror-images of one another. In their methods and attitudes, they are often indistinguishable. Set in a corrupt midwestern city in the final days before a municipal election, the film makes no moralistic good-bad distinctions. McQuigg, the nominal hero, is a sharp-elbowed, aggressive, but ultimately ineffectual force; by default, and because of his less lethal faults (for example, endowing "a chair in civics" in order to facilitate his ne'er-do-well younger brother's college admission), Scanlon becomes the film's most sympathetic character. Certainly he is the most independent and single-minded