

It is axiomatic that the evolution of film noir entering the new millennium will be linked, as always, with what happens to, and in, the American city. If we continue, as seems certain, to become an ever more urbanized society, even as—paradoxically—our urban cores disintegrate, the material which defines noir will become that much more significant. If urban sprawl, with the ever-multiplying suburbs growing impossibly dense, is carried to its logical (and terrifying) extreme, will there be a linking up of megapolitan systems? For example, a merging from Boston to New York to Philadelphia to Washington to Atlanta to Miami, until the entire Eastern seaboard is a continuous city? So that, on a map, instead of a series of black dots connected by highways, there will be a thick black line rimming the continent. Fantastic—but no more so than the notion of a single megalopolis would have been a mere two centuries ago.

Noir continues to be one of the central cultural phenomena of the postwar American city, a cutting-edge form that inevitably appears in, and emblemizes, times of deep stress. Making a prophet of Thomas Jefferson, the word “city” itself at the close of our century invariably implies that which is darkly complex, chaotic, and corrupt. In film noir, a primary implication is that the city of tomorrow will be an apocalyptic city. That the climax set in motion by the darker forces of predatoriness, prodigality, and dread will surely manifest itself in biblical terms: the wave of fire (like the atomic fireball) that levels the cities of the plain. Despite myriad treaties, diplomatic niceties, and even the end of the Cold War, the fact remains that human society maintains the means of self-annihilation which it did not possess prior to 1945. Anyone born after that year has lived with that unalterable reality as if it were no less than a *de facto* appendage to the laws of nature. That an American city is now more likely to be devastated by the nuclear weapon which a terrorist can plant in a car trunk than the intercontinental ballistic missile that screams through the sky from eastern Russia is surely cause for more, not less, angst. That the terrorist may as easily be an American citizen—with far more lethal capabilities than the old Cold War saboteur—as a foreign national ought to be the source of even greater angst.

Alongside the constant of nuclear and biological terrorism, we now accept as givens the institutionalization of corporate crime and

the internationalization of high-tech organized crime in which illicit capital can move between distant cities at the speed of a computer command. That sort of rarefied criminal ether, by its very rapidity and abstractness, and the fact that—like Keyser Soze—it is so many steps removed from its victims, feeds into one of the basic tenets of the noir ethos: that remote forces more powerful than ourselves, whom we will never confront, perhaps never even be aware of, and who are insulated from any accountability, can change our fate in a flash. The incomprehensible sizes of institutions private and public since the Second World War, from business conglomerates to governments overseeing enormously complex populations, has been a prime factor in the development of noir as a cultural force; for the individual faced with a physical and psychological labyrinth so fantastical in scope or design as to be unnegotiable, the quest may devolve from a goal of illumination with a slim chance of escape—as with earlier noir heroes—to one of bare survival while seeking out the least excruciating torment. At the same time, in an era in which we have absorbed the notion of computer criminals devising credit scams and instilling viruses, and detectives who, with laptops and cellular phones, track them down in cyberspace—yet another labyrinth of infinite rooms and corridors—we also have an everyday, street reality more barbaric than ever before, with battlefield weapons, semiautomatic rifles and pistols, in the hands of even low-level criminals like muggers and stickup men. So the apocalyptic city for which we seem hellbent in film noir is one that will combust on many levels, from the political to the criminal, from virtual reality to the gutter.

Northrop Frye observes that in William Blake's work, "the struggle between good and evil conceals a genuine dialectic of eternal life and eternal death, the separation of which is achieved only in the apocalypse. Satan in Blake's visionary poems is the death-principle, including not only physical death but all the workings of the death-impulse in human life, the discouraging or prohibiting of free activity. . . ." Freud famously reaches a similar conclusion, and it is important to recall Lewis Mumford's definition of "civilization" ("the ability to live and thrive in cities") when we read it in this context: "And now, I think, the meaning of the evolution of civilization is no longer obscure to us. It must present the struggle between Eros and Death, between the instinct of life and the instinct of destruc-

tion. . . ." A struggle that is anything but black and white, both in the noir city and in the psychological terrain of the film noir: after all, it is the same Ariadne who has provided him with a route out of the labyrinth and with whom he has fallen in love, whom Theseus, in his haste to return to the city-state, later abandons on a paradisaical island. Mumford, more pessimistic than Frye or Freud, might insist that Theseus' true mission, just begun by bringing the thalassocracy of Crete to Athens, is grimly to move his polis a few notches along the scale toward the necropolis it must eventually become. For, back home, Theseus becomes one of the first great city-builders: he abolishes the numerous towns and villages that constitute Attica and concentrates their inhabitants into a capital city. "In this way," according to Plutarch, "he transformed them into one people belonging to one city," where he built a "single town-hall and senate house" on the Acropolis and abolished, by force when necessary, all vestiges of the existing local governments; in short, he created a centralized metropolis. He then consolidated his power by executing fifty of his most formidable opponents, but also drew up the city's first rudimentary constitution and became the first Greek king to mint coinage. Ariadne was gone (having hanged herself), but not completely forgotten, for Theseus ordered that the city's inaugural coins be imprinted with the head of a bull, to celebrate his slaying the Minotaur and escaping the labyrinth.

Film is of course a twentieth-century phenomenon, its most direct antecedents photography and the theater. Films with sound have only been around for seventy years. With the technological free-for-all that has been set in motion by computer chips and fiber optics, who knows if film, as we understand the term, will retain any meaning seventy years from now. What will come over phone lines (or via satellite receivers) into our homes in the year 2100, visually, aurally, and perhaps tactilely and olfactorily, may be a noir experience akin to the "feelies" that Aldous Huxley foresaw in *Brave New World*. For the moment, however, we still have films, and a virtual renaissance of neo-noir films that are being shot today. Film noir retrospectives, like the one I stumbled on at The New Yorker cinema in Paris in the summer of 1973, and the many I have attended ever since on this side of the Atlantic, are still flourishing. Many are thematic, based on the films' respective *femmes fatales*, or on a subtext like the com-

munist menace, or on the oeuvre of a director like Aldrich, Welles, or Wilder, or on the fact that the featured films were shot in a particular city. Others consist simply of a dozen films, shown in pairs, that share nothing more than the identification tag "film noir," which—a far cry from the early 1950s when it was known only to cineastes—has now become a familiar element in our cultural vocabulary, long since freed of its italics as a French borrowing.

Every so often in one of those darkened theaters, someone will for the first time watch Jane Greer as Kathie Moffet step from the sunlight into the deep shadows of that cantina where Robert Mitchum as Jeff Bailey is sitting alone. He is also watching her, in her white dress that suddenly turns luminous, gazing at her face as it comes into view for the first time, beautiful and wary and glowing, before she slips past him, and draws him with her, back into the darkness.