

Pervasive elements of myth inform film noir on the deepest levels. The critic Northrop Frye's encapsulation of the solar myths that span countless cultures certainly applies to the noir universe: "The hero travels perilously through a dark labyrinthine underworld full of monsters between sunrise and sunset." The hero is among the monsters, out of the sun, until he reemerges—into the night. In all films noirs, the respective labyrinths are as varied as the heroes who must enter them. Which is to say that the depiction of the particular city, its milieu, and its relationship to the hero on his quest within its bowels is unique to each film. The city itself counterpoints and anticipates the hero's actions almost as another character would. In literature, we find this phenomenon in the Venice of Italo Calvino's novel *Invisible Cities*, whose nameless, anonymous residents populate a city at once monolithic and multfluid in its complexity, in the hallucinatory Paris of André Breton's *Nadja*, and the devouring, Grendel-like metropolis in the Russian futurist Andrei Biely's *St. Petersburg*. The city-as-a-character in film noir is revealed to us incrementally, in the way of a cubist construction, plane by plane, prism by prism, off a multifaceted whole. (In a 1950 film, *Once a Thief*, the "City of Los Angeles" is even listed among the characters in the credits.)

An astonishing number of films noirs begin with one of two images behind their opening credits: a cityscape at night, stationary or panned by a moving camera; or a train or locomotive hurtling through the night. The train we will discuss elsewhere, but the cityscape is so prevalent as an opening for these films that it is mind-boggling to contemplate how many different directors, producers, and studio executives in the same city, during the same period, were unaware (or unfazed by) the sheer repetitiveness of the device. In these cityscapes we are often being introduced to the film's most significant element—the city—just as in other genres we more commonly see one of the characters enter a film's narrative frame (that is, a specific locale or situation) behind the opening credits. In a film noir, when the credits have run their course (and it's hard to resist mentioning that in *Kiss Me Deadly*, alone among *any* films I've ever encountered, the opening credits run *backward*, thus setting the tone immediately for the film's upside-down moral universe), we nearly always cut directly to its hero, somewhere within the enormous urban jungle we have been gazing at from afar.

He may be in a cramped room, crisscrossed by shadows, waiting apprehensively for a knock at the door; or sweating profusely, staring at his own reflection in a window while a telephone insistently rings; or behind the wheel of a car careering across a suspension bridge; or lighting a cigarette, glancing over his shoulder anxiously in the gloom of a public park; or struggling desperately against the flow of a rush-hour crowd; or kissing a woman on a rooftop, among the flapping sheets on clotheslines, while police sirens approach; or ducking from a nightclub in a rumpled coat and merging into the darkness of an alley; or huddled in a doorway in biting cold or blistering heat—for the weather in the noir city, like the human condition, fluctuates between harsh extremes.

From the first, the labyrinth in the film noir—the city-as-world—is made to appear implacable and unassailable, and the hero puny and vulnerable. The one, all stone and steel, will endure; the other will play out a short, transient role among millions of others as insignificant and interchangeable as he, and then disappear. For a brief interlude, he will be like a free-floating electron off the great mass of men. The hero of a film noir is not the hero as we find him elsewhere in film. Heroic he may appear on occasion, even recklessly so, and brave, and sympathetic despite his deep flaws, but when he comes into sharpest focus on one of those rain-washed, shadowy, starkly lit streets that is the *terra cognita* of the film noir, I see him (and have always identified with him) for what he really is: a victim.

2. *Night and the City*

When the French architect Le Corbusier first laid eyes on Manhattan, he exclaimed, "It is hot-jazz in stone!" It was November 1945, and he was approaching the city on a commercial airliner. His enthusiasm, not wholly a matter of professional admiration, was fanned by the fact that twelve hours before he had left behind a smoldering and war-torn Europe in which major cities like New York had been reduced to rubble. A Europe in which the cities that were still standing offered little jazz to be seen—or heard.

Invited to New York to participate in the design of the U.N. Secretariat Building, Le Corbusier had witnessed close-up the first modern war in which large cities and their civilian populations were systematically targeted for massive bombardments. In previous wars, cities had been subjected to sieges, occupations, sabotage, and artillery fire, but not until Hitler's *Blitzkrieg* overran Warsaw in 1939 had anyone seen a technologically advanced army and air force so singlemindedly encircle and decimate a nonmilitary target, full of innocent citizens, in order to extort a military surrender from their government. In our own higher-tech age, such a strategy (Hanoi/1969, Kabul/1979, Grozny/1995, and Sarajevo/1992–95) hardly raises eyebrows anymore. Why should it when a name like "Beirut" instantly conjures the spectacle of modern urban warfare in its most advanced (perhaps terminal) stage: the city itself as battlefield, imploding from within.

In 1939, this was still a faraway concept to Americans. While the cities on the U.S. mainland were untouched by the Second World War, their residents, sitting rapt before the stark newsreels pre-

mented (between the cartoon and the main feature) in their movie theaters, were themselves bombarded: with graphic images. The firebombing of London, the relentless pounding of Stalingrad and Nanking, the destruction of Rotterdam, and the carpet-bombings (one thousand tons of TNT a night) of Dresden, Hamburg, and Berlin. On the night of March 9–10, 1945, this sort of high-intensity bombing reached its apogee when 325 U.S. Army B-29s from the XXI Bomber Command dropped six tons of incendiaries over the heart of downtown Tokyo, creating a sixteen-square-mile inferno. The American crewmen, flying at an altitude of only five thousand feet, later said they could smell burning flesh, and their commanding general claimed that in those thirty minutes of bombing, more casualties were inflicted “than in any other military action in the history of the world.” The raid left an estimated 97,000 dead, 125,000 wounded, and 1,200,000 homeless. Two months later, 800 B-29s literally scorched a 21-mile-long, two-mile-wide ribbon of fire from Yokohama to Tokyo.

Then, finally, a few months before Le Corbusier’s plane circled over the glittering skyline of Manhattan Island, a single B-29 with a crew of ten dropped a clumsy, 200-pound spherical bomb officially code-named “Little Boy” on the commercial city of Hiroshima in southwest Japan, killing 80,000 men, women, and children in a matter of minutes and leveling ninety percent of the city’s infrastructure—that is, nearly every building, bridge, train line, electrical tower, and telephone pole. At least 100,000 people were injured, and the number of official dead over the years, from radiation sickness and burns, would reach 187,000. For two days after Hiroshima, B-29s dropped propaganda leaflets over densely populated areas of Tokyo and Nagoya that began: “*Evacuate your cities now!* Every day of added resistance will bring greater terror to you. Bombs will blast great holes in your cities.” On the third day, 40,000 more people were killed and 60,000 injured when a bomb code-named “Fat Man,” plutonium at the core surrounded by several tons of TNT, was dropped on the smaller industrial city of Nagasaki. Ironically, Hiroshima had never previously been bombed, conventionally or with incendiaries, because it was considered too insignificant in military terms. Thus Hiroshima and Nagasaki became the first cities of the Atomic Age. After the firebombing of Tokyo the streets and rivers

were clotted with corpses. But at the epicenters of the blasts that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki there was barely even a scattering of rubble afterward, just blackened earth and hardened puddles of melted steel.

In the first newsreel rushed back to the United States for public consumption, the film itself seems to be crackling with radioactivity. First, the camera surveys the heaps of the dead and dying, then enters a clinic where a group of survivors—the grotesquely burned, the blinded, the maimed, and a dozen naked children in shock—have been lined up for inspection under harsh lamps. Then we’re taken outdoors again, though the vista is so unreal it’s difficult to grasp this at first. We’re moving across a shadeless, dusty landscape—flat, blanched, and starkly lit as the desert—a necropolis where the city’s central districts had once converged. Suddenly the camera stops before what looks like a man-shaped blot on a cement wall. The camera pans in closer and we realize that the blot is all that remains of someone who was utterly vaporized by the “fire wall,” 50,000 degrees Fahrenheit at its core, that swept across the city (preceded by a tremendous shockwave, estimated at the force of five thousand locomotives traveling at 200 mph) and in this particular spot left behind only a two-dimensional impression, a charred shadow, with no evidence of bones, flesh, or clothing—nothing that will remotely testify to the human identity of the man who disappeared there.

It is from images of these foreign cities (ironically, transmitted through the medium of film) and their entrance into the dream-life of Americans, that the film noir springs. To the American in his neighborhood movie theater, in Chicago, Pittsburgh, or Miami, as well as smalltown U.S.A., the message is clear: the big city is now a place where a hundred thousand—no, even five million—people can be incinerated in the time it takes to boil an egg. Americans must deal literally and metaphysically with the hard fact that, like other city dwellers around the world, their lives and their civilization are now very much in other people’s hands. The subliminal messages are far more complex, and insidious, and find expression—some of it in film—in all manner of human angst, alienation, and duplicity; in the simultaneous glorification of and disgust with violence, glamour, and power, and in the underlying belief that fear itself planted deep in

the collective bone marrow of the populace, can be a force as explosive and debilitating as that of any weapon of destruction.

Is it mere chance that the earliest surviving images of the city, on the pre-dynastic Egyptian palletoes, picture its destruction? Or that every advanced civilization in history has begun with a vital urban core—the polis—and ended in a graveyard of dust and bones, a city of the dead? Every American city is always a tale of two cities: the surface city, orderly and functional, imbued with customs and routine, and its shadow, the nether-city, rife with darker impulses and forbidden currents, a world of violence and chaos. The one superimposed uneasily over the other. Just as the sunlit polis and the sunless necropolis coexist uneasily, simultaneously, and are never mutually exclusive.

Noir has deep taproots in American urban culture. Certainly we find our first truly noir American writer, Edgar Allan Poe, surfacing with a voice like none before him and drifting through our large East Coast cities—Boston, New York, Baltimore—which he brings to life and redefines at the onset of the Industrial Revolution, just when those cities truly became modern. That is, they reached the point at which they would be recognizable to those of us alive today. The word, now a cognate, is French, but “noir” is an utterly homegrown, American phenomenon. Film noir is only the latest, most influential, and arguably the definitive manifestation of all things noir.

And what is noir, etymology aside? A state of mind, an aesthetic school, a philosophy, an ethos, a sensibility, an attitude, a symbolic system? Something undefinable—a kind of raw poetry, like the snatch of a ghost sonata one hears at the outskirts of the necropolis? Or is it, first and foremost, a *style*? It is all of these things and more. “Noir” has been used to describe everything from political movements and fads to artistic trends and subversive impulses. Mercury-like, it slips easy definition. Using a simpler, maybe too simple, metaphor, we might say it is the dark mirror reflecting the dark underside of American urban life—the subterranean city—from which much crime, high and low culture, raw sexual energy and deviations, and other elemental, ambiguous forces that fuel the greater society often spring. Reflecting the infernal, complex lower depths of American urban life, which is composed in shifting parts of blood and cement, nightmares and iron.

One particular fragment of this mirror—like a touchstone to be returned to again and again—are the films noirs made in the United States since 1945. These films, which first reflected the urban landscape—physically and emotionally—eventually changed the way we looked at and felt about our cities, and in so doing, through their audience over the past fifty years and their considerable impact on the other arts and on popular styles, changed the cities themselves. However one tries to define or explain noir, the common denominator must always be the city. The two are inseparable. The great, sprawling American city, endlessly in flux, both spectacular and sor-did, with all its amazing permutations of human and topographical growths, with its deeply textured nocturnal life that can be a seductive, almost otherworldly, labyrinth of dreams or a tawdry bazaar of lost souls: the city is the seedbed of noir.

In 1945, it is as if the war, and the social eruptions in its aftermath, unleashed demons that had been bottled up in the national psyche, not just since 1939, or the Great Depression (for the noir movement, as much as it is a collective shudder on the threshold of the Atomic Age, is also a delayed reaction—delayed by the war—to the Depression); demons lurking since the predawn of the Industrial Revolution and the breakneck consolidation of our large cities when Alexander Hamilton’s vision of an urban, business-and-factory-oriented America prevailed once and for all over Thomas Jefferson’s “democratic vista” of small towns and farms multiplying across the continent. Oswald Spengler, the visionary German historian, wrote on the eve of the First World War: “The rise of New York to the position of world-city during the Civil War of 1861–65 may perhaps prove to have been the most pregnant event of the nineteenth century.” Certainly the American city as a large-scale enterprise is a recent phenomenon any way you look at it. Most of our enormous cities in the late 1940s had barely existed one hundred years earlier. Take Los Angeles: in 1830 a mission settlement on the fringes of the Spanish Empire, by 1945 it is a 500-square-mile sprawl. In 1830, Detroit was a trading post at a frontier crossroads. Houston a muddy cattle town called Harrisburg. San Francisco a hillside village which went by the name Yerba Buena. Chicago, which also boomed exponentially after 1865, had yet to be incorporated as a village. Denver and Seattle, of course, didn’t even exist.

In historical terms, our urban culture has developed at hothouse speed, with all attendant hothouse permutations, glorious, freakish, stunted, and delirious. Gilded ages worthy of imperial Rome, and slums to rival Calcutta's. Quicksilver migrations, immigrations, and displacements. Brushfire wars and then two world wars fueled by the plants, factories, and small-bore industries of the cities. The second of these wars ends with a wildly unexpected plunge (the Manhattan Project was unknown to the public until the day Hiroshima was bombed) down a crossroad that no one had imagined. Journalists like Edward R. Murrow note without irony that the Allied victory is accompanied by a mood of uncertainty and fear far bleaker than at any time during the war, including Pearl Harbor. The war ends, but there is no closure. Another war—this one “cold”—begins immediately against a former ally that is suddenly an implacable foe, and dozens of potential Hiroshimas in the USSR and the U.S.A. are targeted for immediate and total annihilation at the commencement of “World War III.” (*Time* magazine, government Civil Defense pamphlets, high school newspapers, and a slew of hysterical Cold War propaganda films all invoke the inevitability of the latter, with menace, and often an insane dash of religiosity.)

[Forces are unleashed. Organized crime, street violence, political corruption, poverty—the popularly lamented ills of urban life in the 1930s—are amplified, and augmented, by the far more corrosive acids of despair, dread, and paranoia, even while the national economy, fueled by breakneck military spending after the war is won, booms. Like the conquistadors who brought untold diseases of the body to the New World in the sixteenth century, the G.I.s returning to the United States from Europe and the Pacific carry, not microbes, but lethal infirmities of the mind and spirit after four years of living day in and day out with brutality and violent death, and of surviving a war in which 1700 cities and townships were destroyed and 35 million people were killed.] (During the war, a number of grisly espionage films, produced as exposés of Axis barbarism, are obvious precursors of film noir: *Secret Agent of Japan* and *Nazi Agent* in 1942, *Behind the Rising Sun* in 1943, and *First Yank into Tokyo* in 1945, all directed by future film noir directors and all depicting the sadistic treatment—floggings, beatings, graphic torture—that American soldiers suffered.) Shellshocked, cynical, and worn down, these re-

turning veterans are either hypercharged and running on empty, or numb and cut off from themselves. At loose ends suddenly, they're under great pressure to reacquaint themselves. To turn off the black energy that enabled them to survive the war as if they are turning off a faucet. Many are debilitated physically and mentally in ways that render the medical profession of their day powerless. Psychotic lapses, insomnia, and amnesia are widespread afflictions. Among veterans, as compared to the population at large, the frequency of acute alcoholism increases exponentially. And drug abuse, which had markedly fallen off in the prewar, post-Prohibition thirties, runs rampant, with predictable results: many soldiers, just out of uniform, turn to serious crime, are drawn into syndicates in the multitiered, big-bucks underworld, and begin peddling the long line of illicit drugs that flourishes after 1945—heroin, cocaine, morphine, right up to crack, angel dust, and ecstasy in the present day—forever changing the face of our cities, large and small.]

[Violence breeds violence, and it is perfectly natural that soldiers returning from the battlefield would gravitate to the cities, where the action of the day, legal and illegal, was centered.] Was smalltown America in any way prepared to grapple with the problems of such men in 1945? Lewis Mumford in *The City in History* writes: “No matter how many valuable functions the city has furthered, it has also served, throughout most of its history, as a container of organized violence.” Certainly this is true of the American city, even in its nascent state, in the 1840s, when Alexis de Tocqueville observed: “Nevertheless, I regard the size of some American cities and especially the nature of their inhabitants as a real danger threatening the future of the democratic republics of the New World, and I should not hesitate to predict that it is through them that they will perish, unless their government succeeds in creating an armed force which, while remaining subject to the wishes of the national majority, is independent of the peoples of the towns and capable of suppressing their excesses.” Tocqueville blithely calls for martial law in the cities, little supposing that Jefferson's rural vision will be rendered moot within a century, and that the soldiers he invokes as urban enforcers will, however valiant in foreign combat, be anything but immune to the “excesses” of the cities upon their return. And why on earth would they be?

Sexually these returning soldiers are at loose ends, as well, in 1945. Women, staffing labor-depleted factories and businesses to support the war effort, have entered the workforce in unprecedented numbers and after the war they are keeping their jobs. Many out of necessity: widows and wives who are supporting husbands who can't find work; and many others, having had a taste of financial independence and responsibility, who have no intention of relinquishing their footholds. Still others, "war widows," have taken up with other men in their husbands' absences, and the husbands have come back to find their homes broken. Without the all-consuming background of the war, men and women have to reinvent themselves in one another's eyes. Men transformed by violence return to women transformed in ways neither sex had previously imagined.

The sexual energies of the country are like a severed wire throwing forth sparks. People are emotionally scalded. Scars aren't healing, and new wounds are festering. And it is the wounds—psychic, sexual, and physical—and the vast tensions, private and familial, that they generate, which are so glaringly amplified in film noir.

In writing of a country at war, which permits itself acts of violence that it would never allow the individual in civilian life, Freud stresses that this invidious paradox has a "seducing influence" on the morality of the citizenry at the war's conclusion. When a society bankrupted in this fashion can no longer credibly rebuke the individual citizen, he goes on, "there is an end of all suppression of the baser passions, and men perpetuate deeds of cruelty, fraud, treachery, and barbarity. . . ."

With this laundry list of vice, Freud could easily have been speaking of the film noir in its depiction of the postwar city. Consider that city not just in light of the idealized Renaissance concept of a human microcosm, but also within the bleak Gothic framework of the city-as-island, the self-contained, self-enclosing (and enclosed) moral universe divorced from the "natural world." Often with the atmosphere of a prison island, with blurred coordinates outside the safer channels of human intercourse, this city harbors a suffocating, utterly man-made (and artificial) atmosphere in which the extremes, and grotesques, of human behavior flourish. Between the economic poles of opulence and squalor, and the overlapping social codes of rapacious *laissez-faire* capitalism and organized crime, the indelible

motto of the postwar American city in the so-called boom years becomes "Anything Goes." In the early years of this century, Leo Tolstoy began his final (emphatically urban) novel, *Resurrection*, with this passage, a kind of Zen distillation of the hardening moral isolation of the great cities: "Though men in their hundreds of thousands had tried their hardest to disfigure that little corner of the earth where they had crowded themselves together, paving the ground with stones so that nothing could grow, weeding out every blade of vegetation, filling the air with fumes of coal and gas, cutting down the trees and driving away every beast and bird . . . grown-up people—adult men and women—never left off cheating and tormenting themselves and one another. . . . What they considered sacred and important were their own devices for wielding power over one another."

Power's inescapable twin is violence, and even by our standards in the last, frayed decade of the century, when a serial killer can zigzag through a city murdering a chain of victims with no better motive than the number combinations on their license plates, or a thirteen-year-old can gun down a schoolmate in order to steal his leather jacket (careful to shoot him in the head so as not to damage the jacket), the urban tableau of blood and guts in the noir universe is still shocking. We're presented with graphic episodes of depravity and sadism such as had never been seen before in American film.

A prison inmate wielding a blowtorch forces a rival inmate to back into the maws of a giant industrial press where he is crushed to death (*Brute Force*).

An undercover treasury agent is run over repeatedly and cut to shreds by his antagonist—a smuggler of illegal immigrants—who is at the controls of a huge plowing-machine combine (*Border Incident*).

A wiry prostitute rips off her wig, revealing herself to be bald, and beats to death with a telephone receiver the pimp who is short-changing her (*The Naked Kiss*).

A police detective, beaten and tied up in a chair, is forced to guzzle hair tonic while a hearing aid, connected to a radio broadcasting a frenetic drum solo at full blast, is stuck in his ear (*The Big Combo*).

Not one of these scenes involves a revolver, machine gun, or knife—the weapons of choice in 1930s gangster films. Suddenly

those weapons seem almost primitive (Blowtorches, telephones, farm vehicles, the newly invented hearing aid: the wartime technological boom, with large-scale machines and gadgets esoteric and frighteningly domestic, makes itself felt not just in atomic doomsday scenarios, but also in one-on-one homicides and assaults where the weapon is clearly to be regarded as an extension of the assailant's fevered (and twisted) imagination.) In film noir, even spontaneous acts of violence, when no weapon is readily at hand, can slide from the grotesque to the surreal; as in *Raw Deal* (1948) when a gangster, angered by a tipsy woman who has spilled a drink in his lap, hurls a platter of flaming crêpes suzette in her face.

The delirium of violence produces its own aesthetics, as a writer like the French novelist Louis-Ferdinand Céline—one of the godfathers of noir—demonstrates in his hallucinatory novels of urban apocalypse. A revolutionary stylist on the order of Joyce and Proust, Céline concluded his career with a trilogy chronicling his zigzag flight across Nazi Germany in the final days of the Second World War, with the Royal Canadian Air Force “raining white fire” from the skies and Céline heading, not for the border, but for the hellish center of that particular labyrinth: Berlin, a city of ashes, rubble, and outright savagery. Between the two world wars, Céline visited several American cities, notably the slums and factory districts not included in guidebooks, and recorded what he saw in his first novel, *Journey to the End of the Night*, as here about New York: “I again tried wandering about a bit in the principal streets of the neighborhood, an insipid carnival of vertiginous buildings. My lassitude deepened before a row of these elongated façades, this monotonous surfeit of streets, bricks, and endless windows, and business and more business, this chancre of promiscuous and pestilential advertising. A mass of grimy, senseless lies. Down by the river I came on other little streets, lots of them, which were more ordinary in size; I mean, for instance, that here all the windows of a single house opposite could have been broken just from where I was standing on the pavement.” The downward spiral of his depression and rage while in our cities became increasingly severe, and it is ironic, from our point of view here, to note, in the same chapter of *Journey to the End of the Night*, the one outlet Céline found for himself: “I clung to the movies,” he wrote, “with a fervor born of despair.”

Céline would anticipate William S. Burroughs, Nathanael West, and Nelson Algren, among others, but before the Second World War there was no American novelist writing as Céline did about American cities. But, then, he had special credentials, and not just as a European whose cities were hit hard in wartime; as a wounded veteran of one world war and a buffeted (and ultimately wounded) urban refugee in another, Céline was able to dissect with ferocious precision the pathological effects of modern warfare upon the city and upon the individual psyches of the participants. (Detroit and Pittsburgh, to him, at the beginning of the Depression, resembled war zones.) In fact, Céline attributed the radical transformation of his writing style—the staccato, machine-gun bursts of prose, punctuated solely by ellipses—to his traumas as a trench soldier and as a victim thirty years later of the carpet-bombing of Berlin. Another former soldier, the Cubist painter Fernand Léger, put a more benign spin on the way in which the dehumanizing violence of war had refashioned his own method of seeing the world—especially the urban world—linking it, interestingly, to the impact of film upon his work. “The war had thrust me, as a soldier, into the heart of a mechanical atmosphere,” he wrote. “Here I sensed a new reality in the detail of the machine, in the common object. I tried to find the plastic value of these fragments of our modern life. I rediscovered them on the cinema screen in the closeups of objects which impressed and influenced me.”

The imaginative work of such artists and writers offers up telling clues about the mental landscapes of millions of other city-dwellers and ex-soldiers in the smoky aftermath of the war, as does the unique, and highly provocative, creative outpouring from the filmmakers of the time.

“A film is a dream,” Orson Welles said, providing us with perhaps the profoundest, and simplest, definition we’ll ever need. The film critic Barbara Deming elaborated on it: “It is not as mirrors reflect us, but rather, as our dreams do, that movies most truly reveal the times.” If so, the broad cycle of films noirs that burst forth on the heels of the Second World War can be seen to comprise the complex mosaic of a single, thirteen-year urban dreamscape—often nightmarish, often fantastic and beautiful, always symbol-laden, and sometimes so starkly black-and-white (literally and figuratively) in its depiction of city life, and of the innermost conflicts and struggles

of the human spirit in the city, that it shocks us into moments of recognition, and epiphany.

Imagine taking your dreams, especially the most frightening and recurrent ones, and affixing titles to them. Imagine using only single-word titles. First, adjectives: *Abandoned*, *Desperate*, *Cornered*, *Pursued*, *Notorious*, *Framed*. Then, single-word nouns: *Tension*, *Conflict*, *Fear*, *Crossfire*, *Whirlpool*, *Detour*, *Decoy*, *Crack-Up*. . . . You begin to get the idea. Every one of these is the title of a film noir, of course. Take the fourteen I've listed, rustle up some verbs and prepositions, and you might be able to write the story line for any number of other films noirs.

The nomenclature of the film noir canon could, in fact, keep a diligent cross-referencer (or semiotician) in clover for some time. The list of those films with the word "city" in the title is too long to catalog here; but consider a few: *Cry of the City*, *The Naked City*, *The Captive City*, *While the City Sleeps*, *The City That Never Sleeps*. Likewise, "street": *Side Street*, *One Way Street*, *The Street With No Name*, *Scarlet Street*, *Street of Chance*. And, of course, "night"—a list that seems never to end: *Nightmare*, *Nightfall*, *Night Editor*, *Night Has a Thousand Eyes*, *The Night Holds Terror*, *The Night Runner*, *Nocturne*. Then there are the very particularized subsets of titles. City addresses: *99 River Street* and *711 Ocean Drive*; and telephone numbers: *Call Northside 777* and *Southside 1-1000* (not to mention *Sorry, Wrong Number*). Names: *Laura*, *Gilda*, *Vicki*, *Mildred Pierce*, with a special category around the name "Johnny": *Johnny Eager*, *Johnny Angel*, *Johnny Apollo*, *Johnny O'Clock*. And the purely aesthetic, grisly-erotic, poeticized titles: *Force of Evil* and *Born to Kill*, with its own unique subset built around the word "kiss": *Kiss Me Deadly*, *Killer's Kiss*, *Kiss of Death*, and upping the ante to a level never quite surpassed, *Kiss the Blood off My Hands*.

These films share a stark, dark vision of American urban life. While they represent the apogee of black-and-white film making, with their stunning visual style and technical virtuosity, on the deepest level they are not concerned primarily with black and white—good and evil, as such—in moral terms, but with the grays, the subtler gradations (as in degrees of Hell) of a more pervasive evil. If the noir world is a fallen one, all its inhabitants are in a fallen state, differentiated only by the magnitude of their demons. Protagonist,

onist, antagonist, and every character in between, are on the same slippery slope (or ladder) into the netherworld—some higher, and some lower, than the others.

So when our two halves of the same city—surface and subterranean—are superimposed, the black and white blurs to gray and we inevitably find our urban inhabitants in a haze, moral and psychological, of ambiguity, mistaken identities, betrayals, and shifting allegiances. Everywhere—in the home, the office, the church, the nightclub—there are pitfalls, blind spots, booby traps. Tripwires that set off elaborate chain reactions. Jolts and shocks and boomerang effects of every variety.

Indeed, walking through a city like New York or Los Angeles is like walking through a dream—or nightmare. Corridors, stairwells, precipitate rooftops, towers and antennae, streets that can be shadowy and frozen in time or frenetic with flashing steel and chrome, forbidding doorways, gigantic windows that with a subtle change of light can become funhouse mirrors, not to mention the ever-changing, infinitely varied faces and grotesqueries—the city of dreams differs very little from the city of reality. On a city street, the eye shifts, the mind distills, the imagination refashions, but one is still overwhelmed by the sheer volume of incoming sensations. In film, as in other artistic media, these can, and must, be isolated and directed within a larger narrative context. The difference in film, as Marshall McLuhan points out, is that it has the power in an instant to present a scene—dense with landscape, figures, objects, weather—that would require many pages of prose to describe. An instant later, it repeats all of this visual information, and goes on doing so. As in a dream, much can be going on, many possibilities may appear to exist, but our unconscious leads us along a very particular path whose significance may only come clear when the dream is over. In an essay on the French poet and decidedly urban film director Jean Cocteau, Ezra Pound wrote, "The life of a village is narrative. . . . In a city the visual impressions succeed each other, overlap, overcross, they are 'cinematographic.'" So, to take the analogy a step further, walking through New York or Los Angeles is not simply like walking through a dream, it is like walking through a dream that is on film, flickering before us. For a human being, the city is a cinematographic experience even before it is put on film.

Perhaps, therefore, it is easy to understand why from the noir perspective the individual human mind and the collective urban psyche, the lone body and the body politic, often coincide. The psyche, especially, is explored in the noir films in the way earlier films, documentary and dramatic, dissected the inner workings of spy rings, big business, crime syndicates, and military operations. So at the same time that postwar traumas shape the lives of our cities, the *craze*—and quickening influence—of psychoanalysis hits our shores with a vengeance and for a while remains a peculiarly urban phenomenon.

In Hollywood, of all places, the obsession with psychoanalysis—as a cultural sensation, remember, not a medical advance—surfaces rapidly and is taken up with immediate enthusiasm by the film industry. Maybe this isn't so surprising: where if not the self-described dream factory of America should this be more likely to occur? Freud himself visited the famous "Dream Land" park at Coney Island in 1909. Newsreel footage records the moment for all time: a small, bearded man in a white panama hat and black suit standing bemused and curious among enormous totems, masks, and mysterious illuminated structures that might have tumbled out of a Piranesi sketch; had he lived into the 1940s, who is to say Freud might not have made a similar pilgrimage to the backlots of Paramount or RKO studios. At the latter, which produced dozens of important films noirs in a compressed period, he would have seen the nightshift of the dream factory—the nightmare division—operating at full tilt.

Violence, sex, and dreams: if there is a trinity of forces behind noir, that may be it. To which should be added glamour. For the film noir's multifaceted reflections of the American city are not restricted to the oneiric or the psychological, much less to the criminal, the sleazy, and the down-on-their-luck. It is not for nothing that "urban" and "urbane" derive from the same root, the Latin *urbanus*. The city has always been the locus for the worlds of fashion, style, art, commerce, entertainment, and information. The place where money and intellect, in complex combinations, reign supreme, anchored not to the cycles of nature but to those of so-called public opinion and taste. The place where violent spectacles, pageantry, sensationalism, and exhibitionism are daily staples. The metropolitan city, in its current, decadent, declining stage of the past fifty years is not just Vanity Fair,

but a sort of continuous, 24-hour-a-day World's Fair, exhausting and exhaustive.)

Sophistication, glamour, and cultural refinement are characteristics shared by many members of the noir population. Casinos and nightclubs, with names like The Blue Dahlia and Club Trinidad, full of sleek, elegantly attired patrons, are a fixture in the noir landscape. In such clubs there is invariably a steamy torch singer, a siren of the night in a clinging, shimmering evening gown who wails into a microphone under a spotlight. Across town somewhere, her opposite number, a smartly dressed, ambitious young professional woman is working overtime in her well-appointed office in a new steel-and-glass high-rise building. She may be hurtling to the top of the advertising heap (*Laura*) or running a publishing company (*The Lady in the Lake*). She lives in a townhouse flat decorated to the nines or an ultramodern, sky-high penthouse with a sweeping vista of the city. And just as the torch singer is often hopelessly entangled with the debonair, powerful, invariably corrupt proprietor of one of those hot nightspots (Eddie Mars in *The Big Sleep* sets the standard for this type), the professional woman may find herself mixed up with a suave art gallery owner (*Crack-Up*), a glossy magazine columnist (*Laura*), an avaricious magazine magnate obsessed with timepieces (*The Big Clock*), or a big-city political boss, still with one foot in the gutter yet always nattily dressed, with custom-made necktie and handmade Milanese shoes (*The Glass Key*)—all of these men sharp-elbowed members of a nouveau riche urban class that has risen up in the war-heated economy from the ashes of the Depression.

After the gasoline rationing, car-pooling, housing shortages, and dreary self-denial of the war years, people yearn for a glamour and recklessness that quickly becomes associated with personal freedom. If it's a fast buck or a dirty buck that gets them a table up close to the siren in one of those clubs, well, so be it. Add to this the tremendous postwar boom in consumer goods and luxury items—which first manifests itself, of course, in the cities—and the wildfire acquisitiveness and gaudy commercialism that accompanied it, and that "freedom-at-any-price" ethos takes on an even uglier tinge. Cinematically, we see it all take shape, up close.)

The high-roofed, rectangular, black or gray coupe of the 1930s is