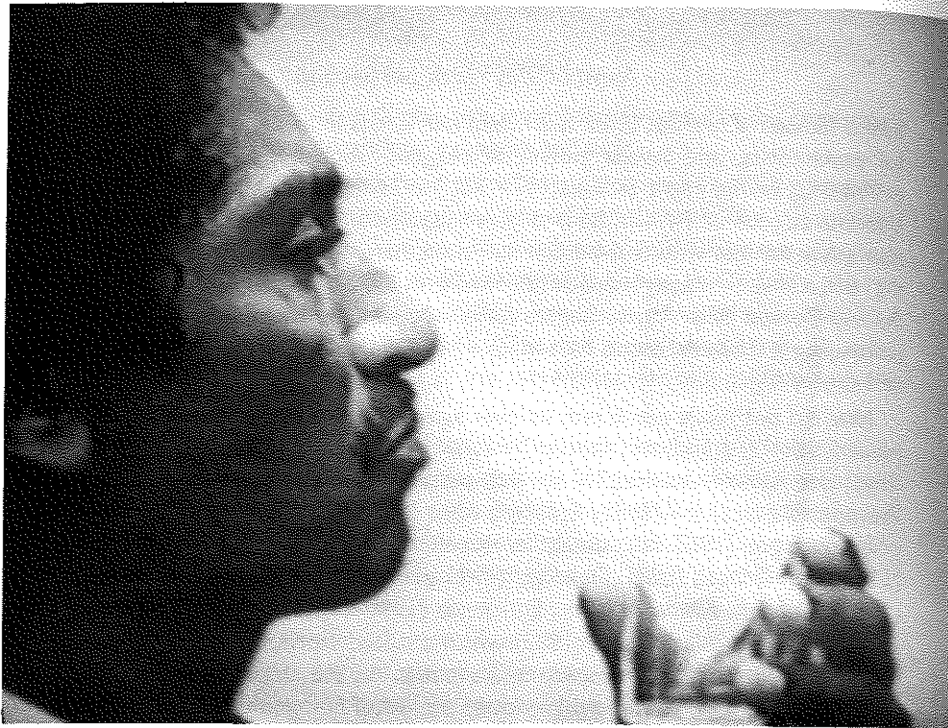


Above, **Figure 1**: a close-up of a man, profiled in a field of bleached white. Below, **Figure 2**: the face of Ricardo Tubbs juts into the frame

Miami Vice: The Legacy of *Film Noir*

Jeremy G. Butler

Presumably, broadcast television does not command our attention the way a film in a theater does. We gaze intensely at film but glance casually at television.[1] This widely held assumption about film and television is being challenged by *Miami Vice*, an NBC police drama that rewards the sustained gaze that is normally reserved for the cinema. Consider the following television fragment.

A television anchorman appears and reminds you that he'll return in an hour to give you the day's news. The screen is then filled with a close-up of a man, profiled in a field of bleached white (**Figure 1**); there is no music and very little ambient sound. A transparent drinking glass in his hand becomes visible as a clear fluid is poured into it from off screen. We are aware of the glass's presence mostly from the fluid's ambient sound, which is startlingly loud compared to the previous silence. The image disorients the viewer through absences: the lack of television's conventionally hyperactive imagery and the lack of television's invocatory soundtrack. This disorientation is soon replaced by mild shock as the glass is slapped from the man's hand by police detective Ricardo Tubbs, whose face juts into the frame (**Figure 2**). Another episode of *Miami Vice* has just begun.[2]

Critics have remarked on the fact that *Miami Vice* does not look or sound like conventional broadcast television. It seems too "cinematic" for the small screen. As Richard T. Jameson notes in *Film Comment*: "It's hard to forbear saying, every five minutes or so, 'I can't believe this was shot for *television*!'"[3] His remark indicates the well worn assumption that film is "art" and television is mere commerce. As John Ellis comments, "For broadcast TV, the culturally respectable is increasingly equated with the cinematic."[4] I take my starting point from Jameson and other critics who have correctly noted *Miami Vice*'s debt to cinematic traditions, but I hope to unload their prejudicial cinema-versus-television baggage. That approach can only generate more hierarchical boundaries and impede interdisciplinary studies in film and television. Granting the undeniable and mutual influence of these two media upon each other, my concern is to address their interrelationship as exemplified in *Miami Vice*. I choose this program not as a necessarily typical example of the film-television relationship but because it poses unique questions about genre and style.

Miami Vice has many antecedents, but most significant among them is the American cinematic genre known as *film noir*—the source of many of the program's thematic, narrative, and stylistic elements. *Film noir* complicates the film-television relationship, however, because it is a genre defined as much by style as by content. Indeed, some writers have gone so far as to insist that *film noir* is not actually a genre per se but rather a style or attitude. Paul Schrader, for example, has argued bluntly, "*film noir* is not a genre.... It is not defined, as are the Western and gangster genres, by conventions of setting and conflict, but rather by the more subtle qualities of tone and mood ."[5] Schrader's comments illustrate one major difference between *film noir* and his implicitly "normal" genres (the Western and the gangster film); *film noir*'s defining characteristics reside largely within style rather than within thematic and narrative structures. Moreover, content-heavy genres such as the Western, the gangster film, and the melodrama have made easy transitions to broadcast television, but because *film noir* depends so heavily on its *cinematic* visual style it is unclear how well the genre might adapt to broadcast television's constraints. In an effort to understand the "televisualization" of this stylized cinematic genre, I will consider *Miami Vice* in the context of more general questions of film and television analysis.

Components of *Film Noir*

Noir visual style is catalogued lucidly in J. A. Place and L. S. Peterson's "Some Visual Motifs of *Film Noir*."[6] They argue that *film noir* is fundamentally "anti-traditional" in its visual style—that it consistently violates the code of classical filmmaking that had evolved through the 1930s. These "violations" are summarized in the table below. To Place and Peterson's catalogue I would add only the use of black-and-white film stock, which is not anti-traditional for the time, but is still an essential part of *noir* visual style.

Classical Cinema	Film Noir
High key (low contrast) lighting	Low key (high contrast) lighting
Balanced, "three-point," lighting	Imbalanced lighting
Day-for-night	Night-for-night
Shallow focus	Deep focus
"Normal" focal length	Wide angle focal length
Symmetrical mise-en-scène	Dissymmetrical mise-en-scène
Eye-level camera	Extreme low and high angles
Open, unobstructed views.	Foreground obstructions

Place and Peterson stress that stylistic elements such as lighting, camera position, and *mise-en-scène* construct meaning as much as *noir* iconography.[7] Further, they argue that these stylistic elements are as responsible for the film's "meaning" as are conventional components of plot and theme. They note, "The characteristic *noir* moods of claustrophobia, paranoia, despair, and nihilism constitute a world view that is expressed not through the films' terse, elliptical dialogue, nor through their confusing, often insoluble plots, but ultimately through their remarkable style."[8] In effect, Place and Peterson (and many other writers on *film noir*) have created a metaphorical interpretation of cinematic style: imbalanced compositions equal an unstable world view.[9] The key to Place and Peterson's position is that *film noir* is anti-traditional; the significance of the genre is generated by its opposition to previous standards of visual style. Meaning is constructed from the contrast of *film noir* with classicism. This "meaning" includes the principal themes of the genre: the hostile instability of the universe (especially women), the impossibility of moral purity, and questions of identity that often involve a *Doppelgänger*.

Noir themes are defined in terms of their break with tradition. More specifically, many writers on *film noir* assume that "postwar disillusionment"—in contrast to wartime faith in America—is expressed in the genre.[10] Thus, *noir* thematics become significant, generate meaning, *in contrast to* a presumed traditional ideology.[11] Noir thematics are assumed to be the dark side of the American dream, a negative image of the 1940s status quo. This "dark" ideology expresses itself in recurrent *noir* narrative structures and character relationships. Indeed, most writers on the genre approach visual style in terms of how that style affects the representation of characters in the films. Place and Peterson, for example, contend, "...in the most notable examples of *film noir*, as the narratives drift headlong into confusion and irrelevance, each character's precarious relationship to the world, the people who inhabit it, and to himself and his own emotions, becomes a function of visual style."[12] Thus, style in *film noir* signifies character dynamics. It is not the presumably "neutral" style of the classical cinema.

Several generalizations can be made about the genre's conventional characters. Men are the ostensible heroes of most *films noir*. They are conventionally the protagonists, but there is seldom anything "heroic" about them. Most commonly they are men with an indiscretion in their past and unpleasantness in their future toward which the present rapidly carries them. The *noir* protagonist is alienated from a combustible, hostile world, driven by obsessions transcending morality and causality according to Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward.[13] The obsessive *noir* protagonist is drawn into a destiny he cannot escape; he is impelled toward his fate by exterior forces beyond his power and interior forces beyond his control.

The women of *film noir* have been divided by Janey Place into two categories: the "rejuvenating redeemer" and the "deadly seductress," also known as the "spider woman."[14] The redemptive woman, according to Place, is strongly associated

with the status quo, moral values, and stable identities. Her love provides an escape route for the alienated protagonist, but he is seldom able to join her world of safety.[15] The rejuvenating redeemer exists as more of an ideal than an attainable reality.

The spider woman is much more central to the genre. Rather than providing an escape or potential release for the protagonist—as does the redeemer—she usually contributes to his downfall. Indeed, she is the central disruptive force: disturbing narrative equilibrium, generating enigmas, and thus catalyzing the entire diegesis. As Mary Ann Doane notes, *film noir* "constitutes itself as a detour, a bending of the hermeneutic code from the questions connected with a crime to the difficulty posed by the woman as enigma (or crime)."[16] In many cases it is the woman who, as Annette Kuhn has observed, motivates the narrative—acting as "the 'trouble' that sets the plot in motion."[17] Consequently, the narrative can be closed off only when it solves the "problem" of the spider woman, when it neutralizes her (sexual) power.

Recently, feminists have been attracted to the spider woman because she provides one of the few instances in American cinema in which the woman is strong and sexually independent. She manipulates and uses men rather than performing as the victim or plaything. To understand the source of her power, we must return to the genre's visual style. The spider woman's diegetic power is directly expressed in her stylistic dominance. She commands the gaze of the camera and occupies a privileged position in the composition.[18] Laura Mulvey argues that this show of spectatorial dominance invokes severe castration anxiety in the male protagonist.[19] In so doing, it corrodes the very foundations of the narrative. Woman is unknowable, unattainable, and lethal. She is an enigma that goes beyond resolution, beyond understanding. Indeed, the desire/threat that she embodies threatens the very foundations of the classical cinematic apparatus. In her analysis of *Gilda* (1946), Doane argues that the spider woman generates a "crisis of vision":

> Since the epistemological cornerstone of the classical text is the dictum, "the image does not lie," *film noir* tends to flirt with the limits of this system, the guarantee of its readability oscillating between an image which often conceals a great deal and a voiceover which is not always entirely credible. Nevertheless, the message is quite clear—unrestrained female sexuality constitutes a danger. Not only to the male but to the system of signification itself. Woman is "the ruin of representation."[20]

According to Doane, the spider woman creates disturbances that are not merely on the level of narrative action but extend to visual style and the cinematic system of signification.

Miami Vice and *Film Noir* Thematics

Miami Vice shares at least three principal themes with *film noir*: moral ambiguity, confusion of identities, and fatalism (caused by a past that predetermines the present). These themes have recurred throughout the first season's episodes. For the sake of clarification, however, I will draw examples mainly from one particular episode, "Calderon's Demise." Originally broadcast early in the first season (October 26, 1984) and rerun as the second half of "The Return of Calderon," a two-hour special presentation, this episode brings the program's thematics into sharp relief.[21]

The shifting ambiguities of *Miami Vice*'s moral universe may well be its most salient characteristic. Unlike, say, *Dragnet*, the representatives of law and order in *Miami Vice* are quite similar to the sociopaths they stalk. There is no clear demarcation between forces of good and those of evil or at least that distinction is constantly changing. In "Calderon's Demise," the St. Andrews' police chief turns out to be corrupt, as does the kind father that Angelina believes Calderon to be. Such turnabouts are common in the program. In one episode, Crockett's friend turns out to be a cop on the take. In another, Crockett himself is suspected of taking a bribe. I would argue that these deceptions are more than just "plot twists." They underpin a fundamentally unstable universe, one in which black is white and white, black.

As Place points out in regard to *film noir*, identities, like values, are ever-changing and must constantly be reestablished. The main technique of vice police, of course, is to work undercover—in a complicated masquerade. They look, talk, and act much like the criminals they pursue. The identities of Crockett and Tubbs change time and again, depending on their assignments. In "Calderon's Demise," they are out of their regular jurisdiction, forced to rely on a corrupt Bahamian official. When they must cut off their ties with him they lose all official status and are, in effect, acting completely as vigilantes. They have no authority in St. Andrews. As Crockett comments, "We're so 'under' we may as well be on another planet." Identity switches are not limited to the police either. In the pilot episode, the viewer is misled into believing that a woman is murdering several persons. When the "woman" is apprehended, she turns out to be a man. On more than one occasion, the "criminal" who is apprehended turns out to be another police officer or an FBI undercover agent. Identities, allegiances, and even sexualities are constantly shifting in *Miami Vice*, resulting in a morally ambiguous universe.

This moral ambiguity also expresses itself in one of the program's main thematic oppositions: the conflict between performing police duties "by the book" and vigilante justice. In the latter, the policeman/woman's actions are motivated by an ambiguous mixture of public duty and personal vengeance. The supposedly neutral defender of society becomes an active participant in the breakdown of so-

cial order. *Miami Vice*'s police officers are conversant in the language of the underworld, skilled in its practices, and prepared to use both for their own ends. Most of the time, these ends coincide with the public good. Sometimes, however, they are not quite congruent. As Angelina points out to Tubbs at the end of "Calderon's Demise," it is no longer merely the police officer's job that governs Tubbs's actions, it is also a more base desire for revenge. This is further illustrated in "Rites of Passage," in which a policewoman from New York avenges the death of her sister. After cold-bloodedly shooting her sister's murderer, she calmly turns to Tubbs and asks him to read her her rights. The defender of social order has become its transgressor.

The form of detection that goes on in *Miami Vice* owes less to Sherlock Holmes-style ratiocination than it does to the *film noir* and, more generally, American hard-boiled fiction, in which the private eye is implicated in the crime that he is supposed to solve. The police work in *Miami Vice* is based on masquerade—bordering on entrapment—rather than well reasoned deduction. Indeed, the perpetrators of the crimes are often known from the beginning of the episode. When they are not and Crockett and Tubbs are forced to actually solve a mystery, they perform quite badly as deductive reasoners. More often than not, they solve it incorrectly as in "The Return of Calderon" and "Cool Running," in which they mistakenly believe they have captured the killer. Their ineptness as problem solvers emphasizes the fact that the true enigma in *Miami Vice* is not who killed whom or who set up the drug deal, but will the moral fabric of society remain intact? In this regard, each episode is a test of faith for the vice detectives.

Crockett and Tubbs are occasionally drawn out of the underworld by a redemptive woman. Crockett's dissolving marriage to Caroline (Belinda Montgomery) and his one episode romance with Brenda (Kim Greist), a career woman, involve redemptive women who could appear in a *film noir*: "She offers the possibility of integration for the alienated, lost man into the stable world of secure values, roles and identities."[22] In slightly different ways, Caroline and Brenda represent the morally stable world of the status quo. Each is outside Crockett and Tubbs's world. Each provides Crockett with an avenue of escape from the world of vice; they offer integration into the middle class. In each case, however, Crockett elects to return to the realm of vice after that realm threatens the redemptive woman. When Crockett attempts to spend time with his estranged wife and their child, for example, he lures Calderon's hit man to their home—a scene reminiscent of the car bombing of the policeman's wife in the Fritz Lang *film noir*, *The Big Heat*. Crockett's weary reimmersion in the underworld typifies the *noir* hero's attitude toward the "above-ground" world of the middle class: Not only does he not belong there, he also can destabilize that world simply by his presence. Consequently, he is fated to remain on the dark side of human existence.

Other elements also nurture the *noir*-like alienation of Crockett and Tubbs. As with many *noir* protagonists, each is haunted by events from the past—indiscretions, acts demanding revenge, humiliation—that intrude on the present. In "Calderon's Demise," Tubbs's obsessive desire to avenge his brother's murder poisons his romance with Angelina, a redemptive woman, when it soon becomes apparent that the man responsible for the killing is also Angelina's father. In a sense, the past determines the future. This is true of many *films noir*, particularly *The Locket* (1947) and the appropriately titled *Out of the Past* (1947). It is small wonder, therefore, that the *film noir* so heavily favored the flashback, a cinematic technique that became fashionable concurrent with the emergence of the *film noir* in the late 1940s. The flashback specifically suits *film noir*'s fatalism because its ending is predetermined. The viewer knows—to a certain extent—how the narrative will close.

The two flashbacks of "Calderon's Demise" serve different narrative functions. The first occurs while Crockett and Tubbs journey to St. Andrews. It includes shots from previous episodes involving Calderon, presented quickly and with no voice-over or, significantly, any sync sound. Instead, the entire sequence is accompanied by a rock music song (Russ Ballard's "Voices"). This flashback functions slightly differently from many cinematic flashbacks. The great majority of film flashbacks present diegetic material the viewer has not previously seen. Although this would be the case in "Calderon's Demise" for a viewer who has never watched the program before, *Miami Vice*'s regular viewers would have seen these shots previously. Thus, the reception of the flashback sequence would differ greatly between regular viewers and non-viewers of the program. For the former, this flashback functions as a quick review of past events. For the latter, it catalyzes an enigma: What do these events mean? For both viewers, however, the flashback connotes the influence of the past on the present. The second flashback (while Crockett and Tubbs return to Miami) serves an altogether different narrative function. It summarizes the episode, redundantly closing off the narrative that begins the first flashback—and could be traced back to the program's pilot. The enigma has been solved before the second flashback begins, so that it (the flashback) operates as a double closure. It emphasizes that the narrative that begins in the pilot and continues through two episodes is now finished.

The fact that Crockett and Tubbs's story continues the week following "Calderon's Demise" exemplifies a significant difference between cinema and television. A typical, classical film follows a conventional narrative progression: stasis, violence/disruption (the enigma posed), the process of solving the enigma, and resolution or closure. A television series, in contrast, must never have complete narrative closure.[23] Instead, each week's episode must work through a set pattern, one which forestalls complete closure . Ellis notes, "Its [broadcast television's] characteristic mode is not one of final closure or totalizing vision; rather it offers a continuous refiguration of events."[24] According to Ellis, television adopts the ever repeatable form of the dilemma—stable in its instability, as it were. Fresh incidents are continuously fed into the dilemma to maintain viewer interest, but

the problem at its heart is never totally resolved. To do so would obviate the purpose of the series. In this context, I suggest that the core dilemma of *Miami Vice* is whether or not the police officers will surrender themselves to the world of vice. Each time they go undercover there is the implication that they might *stay* undercover. Each investigation threatens to move beyond neutral police work into personal vendetta. With the resolution of the dilemma in a particular episode, Crockett and Tubbs's decision to enforce the law is reaffirmed, but the knowledge that they will face the same temptations next week prevents complete closure. In some respects the program is little more than a contemporary morality play, in which temptable men are immersed in a world of temptations. Over the course of each episode they resist their more ignoble impulses and return to the socially approved fold, prepared to renew this internalized conflict next week.

Broadcast television's lack of closure undercuts a crucial element of *film noir*: its arch fatalism. Narrative closure is critical to *film noir* because it fulfills the doom that is prophesied implicitly at the film's start. *Noir* protagonists are paranoid with good reason; the world is generally pitted against them and their fate is invariably an unpleasant one. As is noted in James Damico's model of the typical *noir* narrative, the conclusion involves "the sometimes metaphoric, but usually literal destruction of the woman, the man to whom she is attached, and frequently the protagonist himself" (see, for example, *Out of the Past*).[25] By purging these morally contaminated characters, the *film noir* is able to achieve closure. Such a resolution—Crockett or Tubbs dying—would be aesthetically and economically impossible for *Miami Vice*. Aesthetically, broadcast television must have certain recurring figures with which to renew the series' dilemma. Economically, broadcast television depends on recognizable, bankable, "star" actors to nurture the ratings system. Consequently, the fatalism of *Miami Vice* will never be as cogent or as final as that of *film noir*.

Miami Vice also lacks one key *noir* character: the sexy, duplicitous woman. The sexually independent woman—disrupter of both narrative and visual style—has yet to appear in a central role in the program. Surprisingly, all of the women with whom Crockett and Tubbs have become involved have functioned as redeemers. Angelina, in "Calderon's Demise," may be the episode's central enigma and the evil Calderon's daughter, but she is not part of his world and does not lure Tubbs into danger. In a reversal of *noir* dynamics, it is the man who manipulates the woman, bringing her into the world of vice from which her father has insulated her. Similarly, none of Crockett's lovers have deceived him; instead, each has represented an escape from vice.

The significance of this lack of the "spider woman" becomes most apparent when one considers the voyeurism in *Miami Vice*. Practically every episode includes a scene of police surveillance of a suspect. Indeed, many episodes begin with pre-credit surveillance sequences. These scenes frequently include shots of women in revealing attire and the men usually make a casually sexist remark about

their attractiveness. Unlike the voyeurs of *film noir*, however, Crockett and Tubbs are never enthralled with the woman as spectacle. They are never consumed by an obsession to possess those women as Johnny Farrell is with Gilda or Frank Chambers is with Cora Smith.[26] Thus, the image of a woman in *Miami Vice* does not have the same impact as it does in *film noir*. The woman is divested of her conventional power as spectacle and, consequently, she is no longer the narrative's central enigma, "the 'trouble' that sets the plot in motion."[27] Women continue to be displayed as specular objects, but they now attract the *glance* rather than the sustained gaze. As a result, they no longer exert an implicitly evil influence over men. As feminists have argued, this influence is the result of the woman's *masquerade*, of Gilda or Cora's manipulation of conventional feminine attractiveness to attain her own ends. The masquerade is thus the source of her power, giving her a sexual independence quite rare in classical cinema. In contrast, although women in *Miami Vice* are used for their masquerade (their conventional feminine attractiveness), they are denied the power and independence of *noir* characters such as Gilda or Cora.

In *Miami Vice* we may, therefore, observe a narrative text in which the act of looking holds a central fascination, but in which, strangely enough, a woman is not the object of the gaze. Instead, the gratifiers of Crockett and Tubbs's visual pleasure are *men* involved with narcotics, prostitution, or other criminal activities. Rather than the women of *film noir*, these men are the "trouble" that inaugurates the plot. (The exclusion of women from most of *Miami Vice* opens the program up to an analysis of a homoerotic subtext, especially since one episode, "Evan," specifically addresses homophobia in Crockett and another detective. Such an analysis, however, lies outside the purview of the present paper.) The substitution of men for women as objects of the masculine gaze severely alters the voyeuristic apparatus. Rather than the unknowable and castration-anxiety-provoking (according to Lacanians) woman, Crockett and Tubbs gaze at men who are very similar to themselves—mirror images, one might say. It is as if there is an imaginary unity between the vice detectives and the criminal element. This unity is inevitably broken when the object on display commits an act of violence, which forces the spectators to leave their positions as viewers and engage the object. Thus, their voyeuristic pleasure is disrupted by the aggressive action of the object under observation. Rather than an ostensibly passive woman on display for the active gaze of the male spectator, *Miami Vice* presents displays of active men that elicit the participation of the male spectator. To choose one example among many, in "Smuggler's Blues" Crockett and Tubbs use binoculars to observe a man making a narcotics payoff on a bridge. They then follow him to a boat, which violently explodes while Crockett watches on. Because of this murder, he and Tubbs must masquerade as drug dealers in Cartagena.

Just as conventional heterosexual voyeurism is disrupted, so is the conventional use of masquerade. Crockett and Tubbs's many undercover identities are just so

many masquerades. In a sense, the masquerades of Crockett and Tubbs place them in a conventionally feminine position. They display themselves as narcotics dealers, as pimps, as derelicts for the benefit of the active gaze of the underworld figures they are attempting to lure into captivity—much as the spider woman lures her prey. Their masquerade is of legal necessity a passive one. If Crockett and Tubbs were to actively pursue criminals in this fashion, they would be guilty of entrapment. This passive masquerade cannot be maintained through an entire episode, however. Usually it is broken with an act of violence—for example, the car chase and subsequent dunking in "Calderon's Demise." The spectators of Crockett and Tubbs's masquerades respond violently when the truth is revealed. In turn, their violence triggers Crockett and Tubbs's retribution, making the detectives active forces in the repression of the violent figures. Crockett and Tubbs's final disavowal of the masquerade signals their shift from passivity to activity, allowing them to subjugate the forces of violence and restore the limited narrative equilibrium that television permits. Crockett and Tubbs must "unmask" themselves before the denouement in order to reestablish their position as law enforcers and prepare for subsequent masquerades in episodes to come. There is no conclusion, only a refiguration of events.

Cinematic Style and *Miami Vice*

> Impact on *Miami Vice* is first and foremost, a matter of style. (Richard T. Jameson)

> You load it up with pastels that kind of collide and vibrate by putting, say, a peach next to a mint green in a background, or, having Tubbs in a mint green shirt in a turquoise men's room with a violet tie. That's how you do it. (Michael Mann)

The style of *Miami Vice*, which is anti-traditional television, makes many points of contact with the anti-traditional style of *film noir*. In order to analyze the visual motifs of *Miami Vice*, as Place and Peterson do with *film noir*, I will consider the program's *mise-en-scène*, its "cinematographic" qualities, and its special effects—considering briefly its stylized sound.[28]

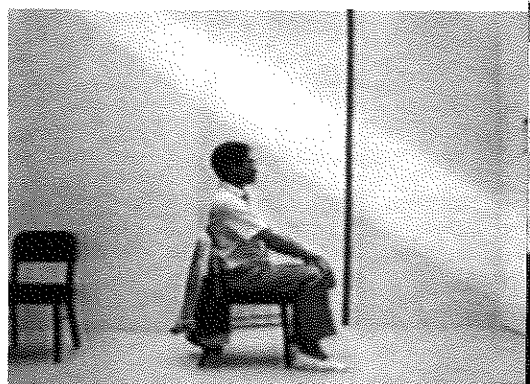
The *mise-en-scène* of *Miami Vice* is largely determined by its chosen setting of Miami in Dade County. Just as *film noir* is strongly associated with the image of squalid city streets, glistening from a recent rain, *Miami Vice* depends on the imagery of Miami: bleached white beaches, pastel mansions on the water, wide boulevards, crowded ghetto streets, ultramodern office complexes, and various bodies of water (the ocean, canals, rivers, concrete swimming pools). Indeed, the program's opening and closing credits serve as a catalogue of Miami iconography, constructing the city itself as a major figure in the narrative. This links *Miami Vice* to *film noir* in two ways. First, the paranoia of *film noir* is specifically associated with urban violence, the violence on a metropolis' mean streets and back alleys. *Noir* cities are most commonly Eastern cities, but the genre does expand to include the Western decadence of Las Vegas and, most pertinently to *Miami Vice*, Los Angeles. The palm trees of Southern California in, say, *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) are closely allied with those of *Miami Vice*. Secondly, *films noir* were among the first Hollywood films to reject the studio in favor of extensive location shooting, especially in post-World War II, semi-documentary *films noir* such as *The House on 92nd Street* (1945) and *The Naked City* (1948). To be sure, *Miami Vice* inherited this impulse toward location shooting, although it is far from unique in this respect. Several contemporary detective television programs use location shooting in a specific setting—for example, *Magnum, P.I.* and *The Streets of San Francisco*. The distinctiveness of *Miami Vice* lies in its choice of Miami and its stylization of that city.

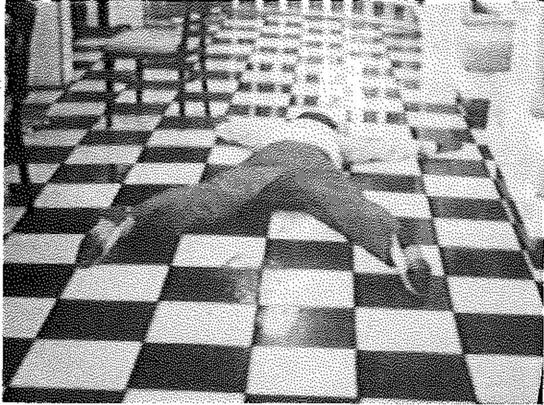
Miami Vice's settings and costuming contribute to a marked visual scheme. Blindingly bright whites and translucent pastels dominate the daytime imagery (see **Figure 3**)—quite unlike most *films noir* (except, perhaps the sunlit *The Postman Always Rings Twice*). Most interiors are decorated in white with occasional patches of color, as can be seen in a variety of settings: Calderon's home (**Figure 4**), detective Switek's apartment (**Figure 5**), and the police department's interrogation room (**Figure 6**). Most of the color saturation is bleached out, leaving very light, pastel colors. In contrast, nighttime scenes are dominated by deep blacks. Scenes are shot night-for-night and employ unconven-

Above, **Figure 3**.

Above, **Figure 4**.

Above, **Figure 5**. Below, **Figure 6**.

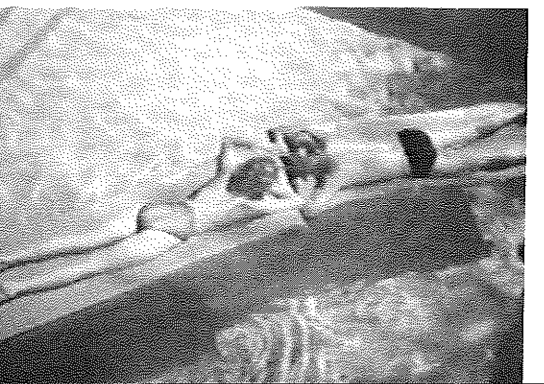




Above, **Figure 7**.

Above, **Figure 8**.

Above, **Figure 9**. Below, **Figure 10**.



tional *noir*-style lighting positions. Emily Benedek evocatively describes one such scene:

> ...following a long shot of Crockett and Tubbs in the Ferrari, the car rolls to a stop under an arching pink and blue neon sign that reads "Bernay's Cafe." Beneath the sign is a long, lit telephone booth. Everything else is blacked out. Sonny gets out of the car and steps to the phone. Edward Hopper in Miami.[29]

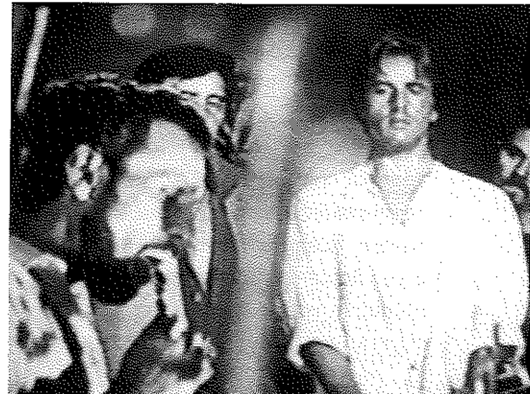
Rejecting standard "three-point" lighting, *Miami Vice* makes full use of lighting positions to create unusually dynamic, imbalanced compositions. In some scenes the blacks and whites contrast so strongly that one forgets one is watching a color film—as when a thug is propelled across black-and-white tiles by the force of a shotgun blast (**Figure 7**). As in *film noir*, blacks contrast starkly with whites in *Miami Vice*.

One final element of *mise-en-scène* is the positioning of figures/actors within the frame, or "blocking." Classical cinema and broadcast television conventionally position the actors for the most efficient transmission of narrative information. *Miami Vice*, in contrast, often positions the actors in such a way as to confuse the viewer, to deny him/her immediate narrative gratification. The opening shot of Mendez (Tito Goya) in "Calderon's Demise" is one such example (**Figure 1**). Positioned as he is, we have no sense of his location or narrative situation. Another shot later in the same episode is similarly unclear. When Crockett poses as a hired killer and goes to meet Calderon's man, the opening shot of the sequence is a long

shot of both men in profile, silhouetted, with a large table occupying the foreground leading up to them and a roof cutting off the upper portion of the frame (**Figure 8**). Instead of performing the customary opening shot function of exposition, this shot obfuscates who the characters are and where they are located. The main visual pleasure of these two shots is their compositional arrangement; they perform inefficiently as narrative signifiers. They disconcert the viewer, *delaying* the progression of the narrative. As Roland Barthes has argued, this form of delay may well be a source of narrative pleasure. It allows the viewer the time to *look*, to grasp the image as image, rather than merely a signifier used to obtain a signified.

Miami Vice utilizes a broad variety of unconventional camera positions. Rather than rely on standard eye-level camera height, the program is peppered with extreme low-angle shots (for example, shooting through Crockett's arm while he is doing pushups [**Figure 9**]) and, less frequently, high-angle shots (**Figure 10**). Instead of a shallow depth of field, spatial relationships are constructed in deep focus—as when Tubbs approaches Angelina on the beach (**Figure 11**). Foreground objects often cramp the frame, obscuring our view of the scene. While Calderon dines in front of a captive Crockett, the foreground is filled with an unidentifiable object (**Figure 12**). Frames within the frame also constrict figure movement, confining characters in claustrophobic compositions, as in "The Maze" (**Figure 13**). In sum, set design, blocking, and camera position combine to create angular forms in strange, dissymetric, closed compositions—imagery that could function well in *film noir*, but which is quite uncommon in broadcast television.

Above, **Figure 11**.



Above, **Figure 12**. Below, **Figure 13**.

Variations on a Style

One of the most radically unconventional stylistic techniques in *Miami Vice* is its use of special effects—in particular, slow motion. The program uses the conventional slow motion in scenes of violence, but it twists those conventions slightly. Slow motion will frequently begin well before the violence does, creating a spooky foreshadowing of things to come. In "Calderon's Demise," for instance, Crockett and Tubbs are attacked while driving a car. The slow motion starts well before the gunfire, marking the impending violence. Additionally, slow motion sometimes continues after the violent act has concluded. When Calderon is machined gunned by Crockett, this death is (conventionally) presented in slow motion as he twists in agony. We cut away to two reaction shots (Crockett, and Angelina and Tubbs). Then, we cut back to Calderon—still in slow motion even though the violence is over—as he sits at the side of the swimming pool. Once he sits down, and *without cutting away*, the shot shifts into regular speed and he falls backward into the pool. The use of slow motion is echoed in some non-violent scenes that would not customarily incorporate slow motion. In "Return of Calderon," several shots of Crockett turning his head are done in slow motion, sometimes leading into the conventional freeze frame before a commercial break. In other episodes, shots of his car will be slowed into a hesitating slow motion—for no conventional reason. Slow motion in *Miami Vice* breaks the conventions of *film noir*, broadcast television, and classical cinema.

Perhaps the greatest seeming difference between *Miami Vice* and *film noir* lies not in any particular element in the imagery but instead in the soundtrack. *Miami Vice*'s audio style and its relationship with image are much closer to music videos than they are to *film noir*. In "Calderon's Demise," the two flashbacks are done without any dialogue whatsoever. In each, a rock song fills the soundtrack and suggests an interpretation of the images. As Crockett and Tubbs travel to the Bahamas, Russ Ballard sings "Voices." This song, with lyrics about looking to the future, accompanies images from past episodes. In "Smuggler's Blues," the entire narrative was suggested by a song written by Glenn Frey. In that instance and in others less literally, the song precedes the image. Images are constructed to "fill in," as it were, the soundtrack.

Several critics have remarked upon this as one of *Miami Vice*'s main innovations. In one respect, however, it is just the logical extension of television's heavy reliance on sound. Because the television viewer does not gaze at the screen with the intensity of the film viewer, television must use the soundtrack to invoke the viewer's attention. As Ellis maintains, "Sound carries the fiction or documentary; the image has a more illustrative function."[30] He contends that the visual poverty of television's images is compensated by the invocatory soundtrack—manipulating the viewer's attention. Thus, the "Smuggler's Blues" episode is the apotheosis of

television: images redundantly restating the meaning of the sound. However, not all of the program's music video-style segments operate in this fashion. The images in the flashback in "Calderon's Demise," for example, do not so much illustrate the song as they operate in somewhat obscure counterpoint. The images are cut together quickly and enigmatically so that the viewer is forced to gaze intently at them at the same time he or she tries to make some connection between them and the song. Here and elsewhere in *Miami Vice*, the images are more allusive than illustrative. This is not only because the first "Calderon's Demise" flashback occurs toward the episode's beginning and thus is part of the construction of an enigma. Even the episode's concluding flashback—accompanied by Tina Turner's "What's Love Got to Do with It?"—points to no one specific meaning. Rather, sound and image interact with one another to create an elusive signification. Consequently, *Miami Vice* places demands on the viewer that are normally reserved to the cinema. We are invited to gaze—not glance—at the images and listen intently to the sounds.

Anti-traditional Television

All of the unconventional stylistic techniques articulated above work against the classical narrative model. They undermine the efficient presentation of narrative and by so doing they offer the viewer a pleasure that is not normally available on television: the pleasure of gazing, of considering the image as image. In this regard, one might apply Michel Mourlet's description of Fritz Lang' post-1948 work to *Miami Vice*:

> ...Lang's climactic period began in 1948 with a *mise-en-scène* which ceased being a prop for the script or a superficial decoration of space to become intense and inward, calling people and settings into question, predicated upon such fundamental problems as eyes, hand movements, the sudden illumination of abysses. Here the script supports the *mise-en-scène*, which becomes the end.[31]

Miami Vice's foregrounding of *mise-en-scène*, its anti-traditional slow motion shots, and even its stress on music that, ironically, heightens viewer awareness of the image, are elements that may be traced back to *film noir*—some more directly than others. It would be misleading, however, to assume that style is the only factor connecting *Miami Vice* to *film noir*. Crockett and Tubbs, alienated heroes in a hostile universe of shifting identities, are the Philip Marlowes of the 1980s. The lack of the spider woman and the ever repeatable nature of the televisual narrative form may somewhat eviscerate the fatalism of *film noir*, but the genre struggles on, attracting a new audience and developing new mechanisms to deal with the demands of the electronic medium.

Notes

1. "Gazing is the constitutive activity of cinema. Broadcast TV demands a rather different kind of looking: that of the glance," writes John Eilis. John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema: Television: Video* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 50.
2. Executive producer: Michael Mann; producer: John Nicolella; created by Anthony Yerkovich; music: Jan Hammer; principal cast: James "Sonny" Crockett (Don Johnson), Ricardo "Rico" Tubbs (Philip Michael Thomas), Stan Switek (Michael Talbott), Larry Zito (John Diehl), Lieutenant Castillo (Edward James Olmos), Gina Calabrese (Saundra Santiago), Trudy (Olivia Brown).
3. Richard T. Jameson, "Men over Miami," *Film Comment*, April 1985, p. 66.
4. Ellis, p. 116.
5. Paul Schrader, "Notes on Film Noir," *Film Comment*, Spring 1972, p. 8.
6. J. A. Place and L. S. Peterson, "Some Visual Motifs of Film Noir," *Film Comment*, January-February 1974, pp. 30-35 [reproduced above, pp. 64-75].
7. Cf. Lawrence Alloway, *Violent America: The Movies 19461964* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1971); Colin McArthur, *Underworld U.S.A.* (New York: Viking Press, 1972); and Edward Buscombe, "The Idea of Genre in the American Cinema," *Screen*, 11, No. 2, 33-45.
8. Place and Peterson, p. 30.
9. This is a legitimate link to make, as long as one recognizes that this signified (unstable world view) has been associated with this stylistic signifier (imbalanced compositions) through arbitrary or, at best, culturally determined, symbolic codes. Imbalanced composition need not necessarily signify disruption and instability.
10. Characteristically, Schrader writes, "For fifteen years the pressures against America's amelioristic cinema had been building up, and, given the freedom, audiences and artists were now eager to take a less optimistic view of things. The disillusionment many soldiers, small businessmen and housewife/factory employees felt in returning to a peacetime economy was directly mirrored in the sordidness of the urban crime film." Schrader, pp. 9-10.
11. This can be observed best when the *noir*/"normal" contrast is articulated within a single film as Pam Cook and Joyce Nelson have shown in *Mildred Pierce* (1945). See Pam Cook, "Duplicity in *Mildred Pierce*," in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1978), pp. 68-82; and Joyce Nelson, "*Mildred Pierce* Reconsidered," *Film Reader*, No. 2 (1977), pp. 65-70. See also Janey Place's comments on *The Big Heat* (1953) and *Night and the City* (1950): Janey Place, "Women in Film Noir," in Kaplan, pp. 35-67.
12. Place and Peterson, p. 32.
13. Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward, eds., *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 1979), pp. 4-5.
14. Place, pp. 42-54.
15. Place, p. 50.

16. Mary Ann Doane, "*Gilda*: Epistemology as Striptease," *Camera Obscura*, No. 11 (Fall 1983), p. 10.
17. Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 34.
18. See Place, p. 45.
19. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, 16, No. 3 (1975), 618.
20. Doane, p. 11, quoting Michele Montrelay.
21. A plot summary may help orient the reader who is unfamiliar with *Miami Vice*. Crockett and Tubbs travel to St. Andrews Island on the trail of Calderon (Miguel Pinero), the narcotics kingpin who in previous episodes killed Tubbs's brother and hired a professional killer to eliminate Crockett. Tubbs seduces Angelina (Phanie Napoli), a mysterious companion of Calderon's, who eventually is revealed to be his daughter. Crockett poses as the hired killer. After their cover is destroyed by the St. Andrews' police chief, Crockett and Tubbs are attacked in their car—winding up in the ocean, unharmed. At Angelina's invitation, they attend a masquerade festival, ostensibly to meet Calderon. Calderon's men capture Crockett, but not Tubbs. In the climax at Calderon's house, Tubbs apprehends Calderon, but a final gun battle erupts and Calderon is fatally shot by Crockett.
22. Place, p. 50.
23. Except for those very rare instances in which a program, is deliberately brought to a halt (for example, *The Fugitive*).
24. Ellis, p. 147.
25. James Damico, "Film Noir: A Modest Proposal," *Film Reader*, No. 3 (1978), p. 54.
26. Johnny (Glenn Ford) and Gilda (Rita Hayworth) are in *Gilda*; Frank (John Garfield) and Cora (Lana Turner) are in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*.
27. Kuhn, p. 34.
28. I here rely on David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's articulation of these terms. See David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).
29. Emily Benedek, "Inside *Miami Vice*," *Rolling Stone*, March 28, 1985, p. 56.
30. Ellis, p. 129.
31. Michel Mourlet, "Fritz Lang's Trajectory," in *Fritz Lang: The Image and the Look*, ed. Stephen Jenkins (London: British Film Institute, 1981), pp. 13-14.