

1. Into the Labyrinth

Picture first, flickering before you, impeccably photographed in rich tones of black and white, a sleek young woman with long dark hair, a cream-colored dress, low-cut and sashed, and a large, flat white hat that conceals her face. With a confident gait she is crossing a sunlit plaza in Acapulco in late afternoon toward a cool, dark cantina. This is our first glimpse of her.

It is also the hero's first glimpse, gazing out at her from the cantina where he has been sitting sleepy-eyed, sipping a beer. A onetime private detective, he has been sent to find her, for a sizeable fee, by another—truly dangerous—man, the urbane gangster, many steps removed from his crimes, who is her lover. After that first look at her, we know from his face that our hero will never take this woman back to the other man, dangerous or not. He knows it too. He is talking to us directly, by way of a voice-over, even as we are watching him, at a corner table, watching her. His voice is far away in time, distanced from the scene before us, reflecting back. Deep, smooth, and languorous, it is a voice with no future—only the past.

"And then I saw her," he says, pausing a beat, "coming out of the sun . . ."

Into the darkness that will be the prime element of their time together. A darkness inside and outside the two of them that will first enmesh, then (seemingly) liberate, and finally entrap them. The teeming, multifarious darkness of film noir. As her face becomes fully, clearly, defined in that shadowy cantina, we see just how beautiful she is.

Our hero does not speak to her, but they exchange glances, and that night he is sitting at the same table, waiting for her. "I even knew," he observes drily, "that she wouldn't come that first night."

But the next night she does come, and for two days he's had nothing to do but fill her out in his imagination. When she enters the cantina, his voice drops a notch.

"And then she walked in," he tells us, "out of the moonlight, smiling . . ."

And he keeps referring to her as emerging from various sorts of light. As a glowing, luminescent image. Almost otherworldly. Always striding into darkness. Always, after that first afternoon (the last afternoon of his life *before her*), at night.

The following night, on a deserted beach, surrounded by the nets of fishermen hung on poles to dry, our hero waits for her, not sure she will keep their assignation. He stands amid the nets like a netted fish himself. A fish she has netted. The surf rolling in behind him. The sand white as powder. Lunar. Wind whistles through the oarlocks of the upturned skiffs and rustles the sharp dune grass as he grows restless in a pool of shadows.

"And then suddenly she appeared," he says with a lift of anticipation, "walking through the moonlight, to me . . ."

To him.

Sitting under one of the nets together, he embraces her for the first time. And the net seems to thicken and close in on him, transformed into a spider's web. She the spider and he the fly. And who is really embracing whom?

When she begins to tell him of the danger they are running, the terrible vengeance that awaits him for betraying the man who has sent him (whom of course she herself has betrayed many times over), he cuts her off with a long kiss, murmuring, "Baby, I don't care."

With that, there is no turning back for him.

They make love in her beach house during a rainstorm. From the wicker door, opening and slamming in the wind, to the bedroom door, their discarded clothes are crumpled together. In the ensuing days, they become inseparable. He can't get enough of her. He sends misleading telegrams back to New York, to the man who sent him, his employer, saying he can't find her. With some cheek, he tells us,

"I sent him a telegram—I *wish you were here*—and then I went to meet her again." Then he sends no telegrams at all. The two of them decide to run away together, but on the day of their departure, the man they fear—and that fear has grown palpably now—arrives unexpectedly, en route elsewhere on gangland business, and nearly catches them together. He is having a drink with our hero when she enters the hotel lobby—out of the glaring sunlight—and he does not see her. And then he returns to New York.

The two lovers slip out of Acapulco that night, by ship, for San Francisco, where they live for a time anonymously. Fearfully, cocooned in blackness. In all their time together, they never feel safe. And as was inevitable, as they both knew would happen, the man who sent our hero to find her sends another man (our hero's former partner in New York) to find both of them.

The ex-partner runs into them at the racetrack. They try to give him the slip, separating and driving cars—each of them taking a different route—to a rendezvous at a cabin in the woods. Our hero is convinced he's not been tailed, and he waits for her on the porch of the cabin. She drives up and parks her car. And still she's coming to him in the darkness, striding out of the light. Not sunlight or moonlight this time.

"And then I saw her," he says, "walking up the dirt road in the headlights of her car . . ."

But another car pulls onto the dirt road from the highway, its headlights off, and snakes up through the trees. Something our hero had not counted on: his ex-partner has followed *her*.

The ex-partner confronts the two of them in the cabin, threatening blackmail. If they pay him off, he won't expose them. There is a fistfight between the two men during which she, effortlessly and unnecessarily, shoots the ex-partner dead. Stunned by her cold-bloodedness, our hero looks at her as if for the first time. Then, in the ensuing confusion, she flees, leaving him to bury the dead man's body. And to take the fall for her.

Under cover, he remains on the West Coast, then changes his name and opens a gas station in a small rural town. Time passes. He lives simply and quietly. He gets engaged to a local schoolteacher with whom he likes to go fishing—in broad daylight, at a freshwater lake. With no nets in sight. Always in daylight, the sun shining so

whitely as almost to blank out the terrain, making us wince. For as in many films noirs, it is the mundane, daylit world that seems unreal, while the night, complex, frictional, sensorially explosive, stimulating in its contrasts, envelops us with an exotic, often erotic, pleasure. "The night pleases us because it suppresses idle details, just as our memory does," Jorge Luis Borges writes in *Labyrinths*. Idle as in unexplosive, sensorially dull.

The extended prelude, like an elaborate mating dance, first in Mexico, then, especially, in San Francisco, sets up the true heart of the film: the hero's quest within the labyrinth of nocturnal San Francisco several years later. Discovered by chance in his new life by a minion of the man he fears, forced to leave behind his rural surroundings and his fiancée and to reassume his former identity for a single night, he is despatched on a bizarre, murky mission, to recover some incriminating tax documents that could put the man he fears into prison for life. It becomes a very long night indeed through which our hero plunges headlong—a night that can be seen as a microcosm of the many vast and varied, endless nights that backdrop all films noirs. In fact, among these films, *Out of the Past* is an oddity in that much of its narrative is constructed of nonurban flashbacks (Mexico, the desert, the small town) that frame the dense, purely urban sequence which is the film's crucible. What is not unusual is the jagged, fragmented mosaic in which these flashbacks are arrayed; like the voice-over, it is another distancing device that makes the action, and the orbit of the characters, that much more alienated, remote, and unstable.

When we first see him in San Francisco that frenzied night, our hero's rustic clothes have given way to the old trenchcoat and soft-brimmed fedora of his New York days; his mild, small-town manners have been swept aside by wisecracking and tough talk. A cigarette dangles from his lip. He squints out from behind its curl of smoke with a clenched jaw. Alert to danger, on his toes as we have not quite seen him before, he nevertheless has a look of doom in his eyes and seems to be carrying a dead weight on his shoulders. He is stepping back into the past, and instinctively he knows that means fulfilling the dynamics of the past, which have merely been suspended—like his true identity—during his years in hiding. He knows that just by being in that city under such circumstances, he has burned his

bridges to his new life. That the circle of his fate, which had been left open for a time, is about to be closed, and there is nothing he can do about it. Though he tries.

Among the myriad people he encounters in the night is his former lover, who is now back living with the man he fears (who, she claims, is blackmailing her too). She also claims still to be in love with our hero. But this time he recoils. When he finds himself alone with her in a darkened room, his tone is no longer worshipful, and he's no longer talking about that ethereal light from which she was forever emerging, into his presence. In his mind, she has fallen miles since then, from shining angel to something considerably less.

"You're like a leaf," he tells her with disgust, "that blows from one gutter to another."

Often in film noir, men veer along a zigzag path with regard to the femme fatale, from reverence to loathing, in truth reflecting (and projecting) more than anything else their feelings about their own condition, their own entrapment, as the walls seem to close in around them. While many times serving as the agent of that entrapment, the femme fatale is always its dark mirror.

The downtown San Francisco in which our hero finds himself could not be more claustrophobic. It is a collapsing, involuted landscape, architecturally and emotionally. The walls that have not already closed in seem to be in the process of doing so before his (and our) eyes. The maze confronting him consists of rain-slicked streets and sidewalks canopied by iron trees; of caged catwalks, rattling fire escapes, dank basements, and twisting corridors; of after-hours office buildings, swank forbidding apartments cluttered with *objets d'art*, and a barren apartment containing only a corpse. Everywhere he goes, shadows are elongated, stairwells steep and winding, and elevators dimly lit; terraces are overhung with thick vines and vacant lots are surrounded by impenetrable foliage. And all the alleys are blind alleys. Our hero in his dark night of the soul has many stations through which he must pass (any one of which might be the terminus) and innumerable characters, on a broad demonic scale, who seek to impede or implicate him, or to grease the skids for his destruction.

There is the woman, his former lover, busily orchestrating his frame-up, casting illusions, manipulating and double-crossing others

(truly she seems to have as many arms as a spider, working simultaneously), all the while professing her undying love for him. Is it a coincidence, or a subliminal association on the screenwriter's part, that the name of this archetypal spider woman is Kathie *Moffet*—a couple of vowels differentiating it from the celebrated nursery rhyme character, Miss *Muffit*; “when along came a spider and sat down beside her. . . .”

There is the second woman, a lesser agent of the man he fears—a sort of minor-league femme fatale—who attempts to seduce and distract our hero, even while maneuvering him deeper into trouble; but he rebuffs her. Her name, while we're at it, is Meta, a word whose definitions include “transformation” and “involving substitution”; for surely she is a disguised, temporary surrogate for the spider woman, who is otherwise occupied. In fact, the two women are explicitly linked when Kathie, making a telephone call within the sea of shadows that is Meta's apartment, pretends to be Meta, imitating her voice and even wearing her hair up (for the only time in the film) as Meta does.

And, streaming into our hero's path throughout, there is an infernal rabble that might have slipped en masse from one of the panels of Hieronymous Bosch's “Garden of Earthly Delights.” Thieves, extortionists, and strong-arm men, bouncers and grifters, a diminutive embezzler, a pimp who's expert with a knife, a junky informer, and an icily professional hit man with an unnerving, unwavering smile plastered on his face.

But no cops anywhere to be seen. No pedestrians or bystanders—innocent or even neutral. Not a single uncomplacent, untainted character except the mute cabbie who briefly shuttles our hero between several points along his dizzying path. Stores and businesses are closed. The absence of a general population is, by implication, a statement of contempt. That is, the great mass of citizens, faceless and oblivious, who will flood the streets at rush hour, en route to dead-end jobs, prisoners of the humdrum, are asleep, disconnected from the energy of the night, their windows sealed and curtained to the streets below. The city we see is the one they have blocked out, stripped of illusions: a jungle of tangled steel, oppressed by harsh weather, treacherously constructed, in which the only order is the unnatural order; the fittest, by necessity, are the most devious and

most ruthless. The only motivation is the criminal one. The only law, survival.

Our hero does some maneuvering himself, punches and counter-punches, improvises with ingenuity, attempts a frame-up of his own, manages to kill the hit man in self-defense, and actually, futilely, gets his hands on those elusive tax documents, but he does not survive.

He lives on for a while, scrambling against the odds, but his death is foreordained. His circle has already closed. He entered the city on a dangerous, hazy errand (if it hadn't been those documents, it would have been something else) and wound up framed for murder, a hunted man, a fugitive whose “wanted” photo is on the front page of every newspaper in California, including his small town's gazette where his fiancée sees it. He's no longer merely a man with a predatory past and fabricated present, but one with no future. It is only a matter of hours before the other woman, the spider woman, has killed both her lovers: first, the dangerous man, shot in the back in his cavernous living room overlooking the desert, and then our hero, shot in the groin behind the wheel of his car, before she herself dies in a hail of police bullets. The three principals—three corners of a rotten triangle—are violently killed, unredeemed, in a chaotic, darkly duplicitous world, which if not within the confines of the inferno is surely within throwing distance.

While *Out of the Past* may have been my first model for, and threshold to, the film noir, a more precise abstract, or bare-bones formula (somewhat in the manner of a film treatment) of the genre, can be drawn. It might read like this:

It is night, always. The hero enters a labyrinth on a quest. He is alone and off-balance. He may be desperate, in flight, or coldly calculating, imagining he is the pursuer rather than the pursued.

A woman invariably joins him at a crucial juncture, when he is most vulnerable. In his eyes she may appear to be wreathed in light, beatific—a Beatrice—guiding and protecting him. Or duplicitous—a Circe—spinning webs of deceit and leading him directly to danger. Often she is a hybrid of the two, whose eventual betrayal of him (or herself) is as ambiguous as her feelings about him. Others seek overtly to thwart him, through brute force or subtler manipulation, or to deflect him into serving their ends. His antagonists are figures

of authority, legal or criminal, that loom out of his reach, or else misfits and outcasts in thrall to the powerful. However random the obstacles in his path may seem, the forces behind them are always more powerful than he.

At the same time, the majority of people he encounters are powerless, and either indifferent to him, or terrified of being drawn into his orbit. When someone does extend him a helping hand, it is usually one of the most downtrodden—crippled, blind, destitute—who have little to lose, though for assisting him, they may pay with their lives. Crime as a constant, and vice and corruption, flourish in every stratum of society through which he passes. The farther he progresses, the more clearly his flaws come into focus. Whatever his surroundings, he remains isolated. The acts of nobility and high-mindedness we customarily associate with heroes in other forms are a luxury he can seldom afford.

He descends downward, into an underworld, on a spiral. The object of his quest is elusive, often an illusion. Usually he is destroyed in one of the labyrinth's innermost cells, by agents of a larger design of which he is only dimly aware.

On rare occasion—and here the woman may play the role of Ariadne in the myth of Theseus, leading him out as well as in—he reemerges into the light with infernal (but often unusable) tools to apply in the life he left behind. But scarred as well, and embittered, with no desire to return to the labyrinth, even were he equipped to do so. More likely, if he survives at all, he is a burnt-out case. And the woman, also like Ariadne, is certain to be abandoned, or destroyed in his place, sometimes sacrificing herself for him, in the end as ignorant as he of that larger design in which they were pawns.

From this classic model of the film noir, dozens of variations radiate. The hero is always an American between the ages of twenty-five and fifty. The labyrinth is an American city. The time is 1940 to the present, with a special concentration on the years 1945–1959.

In *Out of the Past*, the voice-over is essential to the film's overall impact. Narrative technique is particularly refined in film noir. Most of the films adhere to an investigative formula (in the broadest sense: psychological, oneiric, and dramatic) through which informa-

tion is disclosed to the hero. The substance of this information—messages, conversations, thoughts, and raw data—itself comes to constitute a vast, invisible labyrinth that must be penetrated by our hero; inevitably it traps, not only him, but all those around him. The voice-over, on the simplest level, is the device by which the hero shares not only that information, but also his methods of absorbing, distilling, and even deflecting it. In other words, even while his actions reveal much about him, the voice-over shows us how his mind works. It is the oral mapmaking of his journey through the labyrinth.

Dead men tell no tales, the saying goes—but not in film noir, where the hero may narrate his own tale, fluently, from the grave. In *Out of the Past*, this nearly occurs, but, in fact, the voice-over disappears when the narrative arrives at the film's putative present—its coda, really—when Bailey stops relating his story to his fiancée and goes off to his final, fatal rendezvous with Kathie. There are other noir films in which it is clear from the first scene that the voice-over narration will be a posthumous one. The hero is clearly dead, and now he's going to tell us how he died. By way of imaginative voice-overs—alternately presenting facts, uncovering motives, probing his own psyche—the hero will guide us back into the labyrinth, retracing the path he followed to his destruction. He does so with varying doses of bravado, self-deprecation, and fear. His voice is usually an amalgam of many elements, at once knowing, sardonic, soothing, obtuse, arch, resigned. That it is invariably a streetwise voice is ironic, for the story he tells is one in which his street wisdom seems to have failed him on account of willfulness, arrogance, or a host of other character flaws which surfaced in the crucible that preceded, and precipitated, his entry to the labyrinth. This sort of voice-over becomes all the more poignant, and ghostly, when we realize that, as in classical mythology, it is a man's *soul* that has reentered the labyrinth. In effect, this serves to broaden the films' spiritual implications, bringing the totality of the hero's experience—including the manner of his death—into play in recreating and investigating the essence of his life. We come to see that the most "hard-boiled" noir narrator is the one who will most boil down the facts to achieve that essence.

As with most film noir protagonists, the posthumous narrator is possessed by what Leslie Fiedler, in asserting the primacy of the

Gothic influence on American literature since 1800, defines as "images of alienation, flight and abysmal fear." Speaking from the grave is a device Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe often employed. In film noir, in the context of a large city, this device has a particularly powerful distancing effect: the narrator is far removed from us—literally in the beyond—and from his corporeal self. It is as if he is gazing back into the maze of Los Angeles or New York from a distant mountaintop—or a remote planet—with an all-seeing telescope. He can offer us asides. Jump around in time. Send us up the wrong path. Or create a sudden detour. Most significantly, the very discrepancy between the time in which the action on screen is occurring and the time in which his voice is addressing us creates an element of tension, and coldly unsettling dislocation, even before the tensions of plot and characterization manifest themselves.

Take three such films that employ a hero's posthumous voice: *D.O.A.* (1950), directed by Rudolph Maté, and *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), both directed by Billy Wilder. All three are set in Los Angeles (except roughly one-third of *D.O.A.*, which is set in San Francisco). But it is a Los Angeles that is different in each of them—respectively bizarre, seedy, and fantastical. In plot, too, the three films could not be more dissimilar; nor could their heroes, occupationally: an accountant from the Arizona desert, a smooth-talking insurance salesman, and a washed-up, embittered screenwriter.

In *D.O.A.*, the hero has "already been murdered," he tells us. He doesn't know how, when, where, or by whom—the weapon is a slow-working poison—and he ends up being both the detective and victim of his own murder! Like *Double Indemnity* and *Sunset Boulevard*, this entire film is a flashback. (Actually, a set of extremely complex flashbacks within flashbacks, evocative of the jumbled, or mosaic, nature of time—its passages and elongations—in large cities.) In each of these films, the labyrinth symbolism is overpowering. In the opening of *D.O.A.*, the hero enters a police station (with a forbiddingly cavernous entrance) and proceeds with a determined stride along a maze of long, impersonal corridors, making a dizzying succession of ninety-degree turns, until he finds the small office that is his destination. It is here, speaking into a police captain's dictaphone, that he begins his narration, informing the police that he has been mur-

dered; and it is in this office at film's end, as he completes his narration, that the poison finally takes full effect and the hero dies. Obtaining the solution to his own murder literally became the final labor of his life.

Double Indemnity also opens in an office, in downtown Los Angeles, with the hero speaking into a dictaphone. It is 5 A.M. He has been mortally wounded by a gunshot. His narration comes in the form of a confession, for unlike the hero of *D.O.A.*, this insurance salesman gone crooked is very much the instrument of his own destruction. In confessing, he attempts to untangle the skein of events that led him to this fateful point, not for purposes of expiation of sin (as in conventional films), but apparently so he can better understand exactly where he went wrong in his scheming. Again, we are presented with the absurdity of a dying man at the center of his own labyrinth seeking knowledge that can no longer be of any use to him. (A parable of absurdity to please the most doctrinaire existentialist.) And as in *D.O.A.*, the hero is in effect dying before our eyes for the duration of the film until, finally, in the last scene, he expires.

Sunset Boulevard, along the same lines, has the most dramatic opening of all—one of the most arresting in all of film. The narrator begins his story while we gaze from on high at a dead man floating face-down in a swimming pool. Several minutes into the narration, the film cuts to an underwater camera shooting upward from the bottom of the pool. We see the dead man's face. And at that instant the narrator tells us that *he* is the man in the pool. The film then folds back on itself, in a complex layering of flashbacks, only to end with his murder: narrating to the last moment, he's shot in the back, and staggers into the pool.

In another film, *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), based on the Raymond Chandler novel *Farewell, My Lovely* and directed by Edward Dmytryk, we find a hero, not dead, but as close as he might come to death, blind and battered after the zigzag journey through his particular labyrinth. As in *D.O.A.*, we begin in a police station. The hero, his eyes bandaged, is incongruously sitting in an interrogation room surrounded by police detectives who have turned glaring spotlights on him. He begins his narration, and it is not the confession we might expect, but rather an explanation of his innocence. Again, a complicated flashback structure follows, mirroring his tortured

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

vards stream, night and day, with unending lines of moving cars, whose drivers and passengers, without exception, are in shadow, invisible to us throughout the film.

At the midpoint of *Kiss Me Deadly* there is a cryptic allusion to the labyrinth through which the hero is groping his way, made via a reference to the thread that has been left for him. One of the film's many psychological twists is that the Ariadne figure, named Christina, is dead. The posthumous thread she provided for the hero is composed of the most disparate and magical elements: from a scrap of verse by the nineteenth-century poet Christina Rossetti to a snatch of Schubert's "Unfinished Symphony" on the radio (actually, on numerous radios throughout the film, in shifting locales) to a gym locker in a private club, to a dead canary in its cage. And they all lead to a Pandora's box containing, not a cache of stolen gems or unmarked bills, and nothing so common as the incriminating tax documents of *Out of the Past*, but highly unstable nuclear material from the Los Alamos test site that is being peddled on the international black market! The labyrinth is the gorgeously ugly, topsy-turvy moral universe of postatomic Los Angeles, and the film's relentless subtext is nothing less than nuclear apocalypse. The latter is presented as not only inevitable, but perhaps desirable, given the vile, infernal world laid bare for us in the film—a world which will presumably be reduced to ashes.

The Pandora's box is indeed a simple black box—small, anonymous, and banal. Apocalypse in a box, shipped up from the desert. Except that unlike the box Pandora opened in the Greek myth of Epimetheus, from which the ills of Old Age, Labor, Sickness, and Insanity (among others) were released unto mankind, the black box in *Kiss Me Deadly* contains the single element that, ironically, will free men from those infirmities and all others—through annihilation. (Throughout the film, the dangerously fissionable nature of the atomic material parallels the fissionable nature of the characters, each in his or her own way verging on explosion or meltdown from the very first; the mechanic Nick, a kind of one-man Greek chorus, drives this point home—until he is crushed to death—with his signature greeting and constant refrain of *Va-va-voom!*) Unlike the heroes of other films, who might be grazed by a bullet or slashed by a knife, the hero of *Kiss Me Deadly* receives a radioactive burn across

his wrist when he peers into the box for a split second. And the film concludes with a beach house outside Los Angeles turning into ground zero for an atomic explosion when the box is opened fully—its glowing, white-hot contents hissing and roaring like a living, malevolent being—setting off a ferocious conflagration and a chain reaction, into the city and beyond, that clearly will not be stoppable.

The hero is the sardonic, hard-bitten, quick-on-his-feet private detective Mike Hammer. Aldrich and the screenwriter, A.I. Bezzerides, have remodeled and considerably deepened Mickey Spillane's original creation—and added to the varnish of his cynicism a patina of sophistication and worldliness. He may be cold and callous, disdainful and physically brutal, but he maintains a well-appointed, even dapper, exterior. Rough-hewn within and polished without, Hammer is far more isolated and introverted than the hero of *Out of the Past*; he is in all ways a shadier yet more confident brand of detective, with a much less suppressed sadistic streak than his cinematic predecessors. He specializes in expensive divorce cases, often operating on the cusp of the law, playing both ends against the middle (for example, working for both a husband *and* wife, and framing one of them for adultery). With Hammer, we can forget the chivalrous codes of honor of the 1930s detective, and the rough-and-tumble, furnished-room, rumpled-raincoat persona of the 1940s private eye. Unlike Robert Mitchum's Jeff Bailey in *Out of the Past*, Hammer wouldn't be caught dead running a gas station; the mechanic Nick even makes house calls when Hammer requires his services. While every bit as good with his fists as the old private eyes, and no slouch as a street-fighter, Hammer comes off overall as a much more laid-back, materially oriented 1950s man, attached to his creature comforts and luxuries and happy to let surrogates do his dirty work when circumstances permit.

Speeding along a pitch-black ocean road late one night in his sports car convertible, Hammer nearly runs down a wild, barefoot woman wearing only a trenchcoat. Terrified, disheveled, she is running along the double line in the middle of the road and screaming for help. After swerving off the road, Hammer agrees, grudgingly, to give her a lift. They stop at a gas station, where she surreptitiously gives the attendant a letter to post. Then she and Hammer drive on until they come to a massive police roadblock. The cops are search-

ing for a woman fitting her description who has escaped from an asylum. But Hammer covers for her, pretending she's his wife, and they're waved through. Minutes later, however, they are intercepted by a black limousine from which several men in dark suits (whom we only see from the waist down) emerge to overpower them. The woman, Christina, is tortured and murdered in Hammer's presence after he is beaten into semiconsciousness (at which point we only see *her* from the waist down, her legs twitching frantically as she suffers horrors we are left to imagine). Then she and Hammer are pushed over a cliff in his car, and he apparently escapes at the last instant, just before the car bursts into flames, incinerating her body.

Thus begins Hammer's quest, whose mantra is two words which Christina has both spoken to him and sent him posthumously (the contents of the posted letter): "Remember me." These are the words that begin Rossetti's poem "Remember": "Remember me when I am gone away,/Gone far away into the silent land." The silent land which is the wasteland—the postatomic city. It is only much later in the film that Hammer bothers to read the entire poem; in fact, maintaining his odd investigative passivity—a highly unusual trait in an investigator—he has someone read it to him. But after their brief ride together, marked by defensive silences, cryptic deflections, and verbal sparring, this is all Hammer has to go on with regard to Christina. (It is also curious—whether it is intended or not as yet another literary allusion—that in *Hamlet* the last words of his father's Ghost to Hamlet, spurring him on to vengeance, are also, "Remember me.")

The significant women in *Kiss Me Deadly* form a charged, uneasy triad. There is Christina. And Lily Carver, her roommate and seeming alter ego, who dupes and betrays Hammer and in the end shoots him at point-blank range (but does not kill him). And Velda Wake-man, Hammer's Girl Friday, who assists him—and does most of his legwork in the case—along his descent into the tangled netherworld from which Christina was a fugitive. Velda is Hammer's Beatrice and Lily is his Circe (undergoing effortless metamorphoses every time we encounter her, from waif to sex kitten to frightened innocent to cold-blooded killer). The two women alternate places at Hammer's side throughout the film, even to sharing his bed (or, usually, sleeping in it without him, for nocturnally he seems always to be roving),

though he remains remote from them, cold, interested only in the information they can provide—in helter-skelter fashion—that might advance his quest.

In the end, it is Lily and Velda who are alone with Hammer in the beach house, but under very different circumstances. Velda, half-clothed, is imprisoned in a locked room, and down the hall Lily is holding a gun on Hammer. While doing so, out of stubborn curiosity and avarice, Lily opens the Pandora's box and, exposed to the nuclear material, is instantly ignited like a human torch. Velda is released from the locked room by the wounded Hammer, and the two of them try to stagger from the burning, imploding house, but they, too, are consumed in the fire. During the entire film, Lily and Velda never once share a scene together! The beach house finale is the only occasion in which we find them in the same place at the same time, though we never see them together. At the very moment Hammer releases Velda, Lily, a column of fire, dies screaming in the next room. (There is also a subtle echo here of the film's opening: for when Hammer "rescues" Christina on that ocean road, for all of a few minutes she too is scantily dressed and has just escaped from another sort of House of Bedlam—only to perish in flames.)

But rather than seeing Lily and Velda as split halves of the same woman—the all-important guide who accompanies Hammer into the labyrinth—it would be more accurate to understand them as thirds, with Christina as the missing, but ever-hovering, member of the triad. A ghost from The Land of the Dead ("the silent land") who never leaves Hammer's side. The perverse similarities between Lily and Christina are too blatant to be coincidental. Both enter Hammer's life barefoot and naked but for nearly identical clothing—Christina in her trenchcoat, Lily in a bathrobe (in Christina's apartment, lounging on her bed) of a similar shape and color and with a sash like a trenchcoat's. Both have fair hair cut short—choppy and extra short on the forehead. Both speak in oddly syncopated drawls—always with the implication that behind their words there are other words, carefully withheld. Both die by fire. Only at the very end do we learn that Lily's real name is Gabrielle; she murdered the real Lily, dumped her body in the river, and assumed her identity in order to ply information from Hammer on behalf of the smuggling ring that is trying to recover the nuclear material they stole and lost. So our

triad of women takes on a phantom appendage—a fourth woman who is yet another ghost.

In a film in which elements of European high art such as abstract German paintings, Rodin sculptures, and Caruso's recordings of Puccini arias are constantly contrasted with the cultural barrenness of urban American life (where imported culture is a consumer good, on a par with the gleaming consumer items that Hammer enjoys, including an early-model portable television, an elaborate hi-fi set, and the three sports cars we see him drive which represent America's true culture) is the name "Gabrielle" a heavy-handed play on the fact that Christina Rossetti's brother was none other than the pre-Raphaelite poet, doyen of high art—and translator of Dante!—Dante Gabriel Rossetti? Certainly, whether Christina and Lily are mirror-images or dark psychological twins, they are much more inextricably, tortuously, linked than we have been led to believe by the shallow pretense of Lily/Gabrielle's posing as Christina's "roommate." So like the three sisters who are the Three Fates of Greek mythology, and the three witches in *Macbeth*, our triad is also one of interlocking identities and shifting perspectives, of ritualized incantations and portents of doom around, not a cauldron, but a deadly box. *Macbeth*, by the way, may also be seen as a direct literary ancestor of the film noir; on the cusp of Jacobean drama, utterly nocturnal, permeated with violence, blood, darkness, and guilt, when the play was adapted for the screen by none other than Orson Welles he shot it very much in the style of his films noirs.

The crucial scene in *Kiss Me Deadly* in which the labyrinth is alluded to directly occurs in Hammer's office, a sprawling, elaborate, impeccably decorated L-shaped room filled with futuristic furniture and art-deco bric-a-brac. It is nothing like the stock, sparsely furnished private-eye office with the clunky desk, swivel chair, dusty venetian blinds, and neon-lit window we associate with Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe. Across from Hammer's desk there is a sweeping picture window with billowing curtains that overlooks a wide boulevard on which the ubiquitous cars are streaming. Custom-designed to his persona, his office, too, feels remote and frigid, almost otherworldly. As does his gadgetry. For example, the state-of-the-art (1955-vintage) tape recorder/answering machine built into the wall through which he screens his calls (in 1990s fashion), only occa-

sionally, and laconically, picking up to engage the caller in conversation. In a corner where the walls are mirrored from floor to ceiling, Velda is doing stretching exercises on a dance bar. Ballet music (yet another high-art touchstone) is playing on the hi-fi, and the floor beneath her is checkered with black and white tiles. She is wearing a striped black and white shirt and black tights. Hammer is leaning against the wall, sipping Scotch. (*Imported* whiskey—no private-eye rye for him.) They have been discussing the ins and outs of the case as it is taking shape, Velda doing most of the talking, as usual, letting Hammer know what she's discovered. Suddenly, twirling playfully around a black pole that also runs from floor to ceiling, she assumes a seductive voice and purrs, "First you find a little thread, the little thread leads you to a string, and the string leads you to a rope, and from the rope you hang by the neck. . . . What kind of girl was she, this friend of yours, Christina?"

Velda's wordplay around this reference to Ariadne's thread can be read as film noir's version of the inscription Dante affixed at the entrance to his *Inferno*: ABANDON ALL HOPE YOU WHO ENTER HERE. (And, as Hillman says, "To go deep into a dream requires abandoning hope.") The checkered tiles conjure up the obvious reminder that these characters are pieces being moved across a chessboard by larger forces; but they also refer to the labyrinth at Knossus in which the ritual dancing pattern was marked out in mosaic. That Velda is dressed as a dancer, and is ostensibly preparing to dance after her warmup, is yet another echo of the ancient link between the labyrinth and the dance; here, as in Minoan Crete, the hero and his female companion are compelled to perform such a ritual dance in negotiating the maze before them, whose corridors are every bit as intricate, delusory, and dangerous as those in a dream.

There is a small group of films noirs in which the hero is apparently killed at the outset before entering the labyrinth as a dead man—or as a ghost entering the underworld. *Point Blank* (1967) is the most notable of these: even at its climax we are not sure if the hero, who at the film's outset is trapped and shot point blank, in the seconds before his death has merely hallucinated the subsequent narrative in which he tracks down his antagonist—reducing the entire film to a dying man's epiphanic nightmare. *Kiss Me Deadly* may be one of these films, as well. When Hammer goes over the cliff with

Christina, we never do *see* him leap clear of the car before it slides into the darkness and explodes. We don't see anything, in fact: we just cut to Hammer regaining consciousness in a hospital bed days later, with Velda (and remember, her name is Wakeman, as, perhaps, in *Wake, man*) staring down at him. For the rest of the film, what with his icy demeanor, his strange admixture of aggressiveness and passivity, his bizarre hands-off approach to most of the actual investigating, and his utter lack of concern for the worldly (as in, *this* world, rather than the *underworld*) losses he suffers during his odyssey—his detective's license, source of his livelihood, his cars, and ultimately, his most loyal confederates, Nick and Velda—Hammer might as well be a dead man on a posthumous journey. A man who has ventured into the silent land looking to unlock a riddle that will explain his own death.

In 1990, during a period in which the film noir (in vastly different, but also chaotic, potentially incendiary, cultural conditions) is resurgent, there is an eerily close echo of Velda's wordplay in the film *After Dark, My Sweet*, based on the 1955 Jim Thompson novel. At the film's most telling moment, having reached their fatal crossroads, the femme fatale (she isn't dancing, but she is standing on checkered tiles in her kitchen) turns to the hero and murmurs, "That door leads to a walk; at the end of the walk there's a lane; at the end of the lane there's a highway. . . ." The same highway from which he entered the maze that led him to her; the same highway, as she now indicates, that might lead him away from his fate, which of course is death. So archetypes that held up for four millennia—since the Cretan labyrinth was constructed—manage to hold up for yet another four decades in late twentieth-century America.

The Los Angeles of *Kiss Me Deadly* is by day a city of broad, sun-blanked boulevards, of tree-lined streets with antiseptic lawns and boxy cars parked in pools of shade, of dusty vacuous office buildings with black windows, and flat nondescript smaller buildings, which turn out to be havens, by day, for nocturnal pursuits: dark bars, fortune-tellers' parlors, and windowless boxing gyms. By night, the city's downtown is a tableau of slashing white light, steep jet shadows, and richly luminous surfaces punctuated by the flashes of chrome and glass on parked cars, the mirrors on vending machines, and even the stainless steel cart of an all-night popcorn vendor, who

would seem to have little prospect of making a sale on the utterly deserted streets. Those black office building windows at night seem to deepen a shade; when we are permitted a look into some building's interior, we inevitably see dappled Gothic hallways, jagged stairwells, galleries out of a de Chirico painting, or obliquely lit, repressive rooms. In fact, this tableau bears a strong resemblance to the nocturnal San Francisco of *Out of the Past*. But while Los Angeles in *Kiss Me Deadly* is a sprawling wasteland of endless, starkly white streets waiting for the flood of fire, the apocalypse of the Bomb, San Francisco in *Out of the Past* is a tight labyrinth which feels as if at any moment it might accordion in on its residents and engulf them in its blackness.

In eight years—during which the further darkening, enervating influences of the Korean War and the McCarthy era have taken their toll—the postwar city that seemed an insular netherworld of paranoia and dread has mushroomed into a full-blown Pandæmonium. The latter, in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, is the first City of Man, the capital of Hell, built by Cain under the tutelage of Satan. Its countless rooms, corridors, and galleries seem to proliferate without end, thronged with tens of thousands of fallen angels who embody, and take their names from, the vices of mankind. Shades of Virgil, Milton compares Pandæmonium to a beehive, its infernal spirits, in their evil-doing, as industrious as bees. Every film noir is the shadowland of a lost paradise, a fallen state. A silent land. And every film noir city traces its blueprint to some aspect of Pandæmonium.

By 1955, the film noir hero of *Kiss Me Deadly* is no longer merely a prisoner of his private hell: he is the tenant in a universal Hell, as boundaryless and unstoppable in its growth as the nuclear explosion that ends his life. The monstrous, hellish twist at the end of *Kiss Me Deadly*—when that Doomsday box, like a long-awaited, long-diverted Christmas present, is finally opened—is that its climax is really just the beginning of the end: the latter a popular phrase in the Atomic-Age lexicon. (There was even a 1946 film, *The Beginning or the End?*, a pseudo-documentary, jingoistic paean to the Manhattan Project and its godparent, the U.S. government, that extolled the Bomb's development as the crowning achievement of American scientific "know-how" and gumption; the film opened with a grandiose "dedication" scene in which a pompous narrator informs us that "a

print of the film you are about to see has been sealed in a time capsule, capable of withstanding even an atomic war," in order to edify future generations!) Along with Hammer, and his companions and antagonists in the labyrinth, we are to understand that the entire corrupt—and strangely static, not teeming—world of metropolitan Los Angeles is about to be reduced to red-hot cinders. So when graphics reading THE END zoom out the windows of the imploding beach house toward the audience, I read it not as the usual passive, redundant announcement that the film is over, but more as an urgent, existential postscript. And at the same time—the two messages needn't be mutually exclusive—as a sardonic joke: play with fire, on a small scale or a collective one, and you'll burn.

Hammer has projected himself into a nightmare not completely of his own creation that overlaps, and feeds off of, countless other nightmares. Every single major character around him, and most of the minor ones, are killed violently. Incredible as it may seem, this is not a startling fact in the film noir canon. In the urban universe of these films, few characters survive, much less survive with any sort of future on the horizon. *Out of the Past* is no exception. The promise of apocalypse as a coda in *Kiss Me Deadly* makes it a spectacular example, but not a unique one. The specter of nuclear annihilation that hovered over all American cities during the film noir era (especially in its heyday) is clearly evoked by the unwavering fact that when these films conclude with all their principals dead, it is usually for irrational, larger, supposedly deterministic reasons utterly beyond the characters' control. A definition that could apply quite nicely to nuclear war.

The taut, nightmarish maze Hammer enters is wedged within a second maze of gigantic proportions. Much of the tension in the quick, slippery, descending arc he follows to his destruction lies in the fact that the smaller maze is continually contracting while the larger one is ever-expanding. The effect is dizzying. Like looking through a microscope with one eye and a telescope with the other. It is as if the claustrophobia of San Francisco in *Out of the Past* has been magnified a hundred times. In *Kiss Me Deadly*, claustrophobia has become a general condition, not just a specific symptom. That it achieves this effect using that most sprawling of American cities, Los Angeles, only adds to its impact.

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-