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**From Metropolis to Necropolis:  
Modernity and the American City in Sunrise and  
The Big Sleep.**

The American city is both the backdrop and an important character in both F.W. Murnau's *Sunrise* and Howard Hawk's *The Big Sleep*. While both of these films are very different they both offer a snapshot of the American psyche and how it was affected by urban life during two different phases of modernity. In 1913 the French writer Charles Peguy remarked that "the world has changed less since the time of Jesus Christ than it has in the last thirty years."<sup>1</sup> He was speaking of the conditions of Western capitalist society: its idea of itself, its sense of history, its beliefs, morals, pieties, modes of production among other things. To begin with this article will explore concept of modernity, and the effect that the profound changes it brought with it had on the people who lived through it. Having explored the conditions of modernity the article will reflect on how *Sunrise* and *The Big Sleep* articulated the effect that some of these conditions had on the human psyche during two different stages of modernity.

Modernity is a temporal concept, the beginning of which is highly debated. For the purpose of this essay it will be taken that the rise of modern society began with the industrial revolution and modernity as a concept is the name of a series of transformations that followed mass industrialisation and modernisation.<sup>2</sup> The socioeconomic transformations of capitalism catalysed a series of social changes. These included rapid urbanisation and population growth; extensive migration and emigration; the rapid proliferation of new technologies and means of transport; the establishments of stable and predictable legal codes and institutions; an explosion of forms of mass communication and mass amusements; the growth of mass consumption; the entrance of women into the public space; the broader implementation of efficient systems of accounting, record keeping, and public surveillance; the separation of workplace and household as well as the shifting of the primary unit of production from the extended unit of production from the extended family to the factory; the decline of the large extended family due to urbanisation and emigration as people moved to follow jobs outside the house-hold. These interconnected developments reached a kind of critical mass in Europe and America near the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, (London, Thames & Hudson: 2005), 9

<sup>2</sup> Tom Gunning, "Modernity and Cinema: A culture of shocks and flows", in *Cinema and Modernity*, edited by Murray Pomerance, (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press: 2006)

<sup>3</sup> Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity, Early sensationalist Cinema and its Contents*, (New York, Columbia University Press: 2001), 21

Modernity brought with it the moral and ideological instability of a post sacred, post feudal world in which all norms, authorities, and values are open to question. The mores, customs, superstitions and rituals that gave shape to people's lives in traditional societies diminished in the face of the new discoveries and intellectual protocols of science and reason. This cultural discontinuity and loss of cultural moorings had led to what Emile Durkheim called "anomie" in which the normlessness of modernity fostered a cycle of moral ambiguity, restless desire, frustration, and existential meaninglessness.<sup>4</sup>

The primary catalyst of social discontinuity was the global rise of capitalism and the unprecedented social mobility and circulation that it generated. Modern transportation and communications technologies exploded the traditional relationships between time and space resulting in the "shrinkage of the world." This was in direct contrast to the relative isolation, uniformity, and continuity of traditional societies. Modernity was distinguished by its fluid and chaotic mixture of social objects and subjects. The result was a conception of modernity as a period of ceaseless change, instability, fragmentation, complexity and chaos.<sup>5</sup> This is articulated by Marx and Engles:

Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social relations, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeoisie epoch from all earlier ones[...]All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient prejudices and opinions, are swept away; all new formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy, is profane.<sup>6</sup>

Modernity is also associated with the rise of the individual. The subjectivity of sovereign individuals- their sense of identity and place in the world with respect to status, rank, position, purpose, mode of life, etc.- was no longer a given, no longer predetermined by factors such as birth into a given status, religion or community. People could envision real possibilities of social, geographic and economic mobility for themselves. Capitalism also had a profound effect on the status of the individual. Individualism stemmed from the personal autonomy made possible by the money economy. Modern capitalism redefined the basic social unit from the group to the individual. Individual independence was self-sufficiency contingent on the provision of necessities via the market place.<sup>7</sup> This independence also implied social separation and alienation. The

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 24-25

<sup>5</sup> Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity*, 29

<sup>6</sup> Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, (London, Penguin: 1967), 8

<sup>7</sup> Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity*, 31

individual was separated from the family or tribe and also separated from the other free agents in the capitalist economy. Above all capitalist individualism implied pervasive competition for personal material advancement. The emergence of modern capitalism and urban life led to a social order, and frame of mind, shaped by an economic life based on universal competition, a money economy, contractual relations, the commodification of goods and services, and a profit-motivated system of exchange among totally independent and self-interested individuals. Everyone was looking out for themselves with no sense of affinity for others. The destruction of communal feeling although stemming from capitalism was amplified by the anonymity and impersonality of urban society. The modern city changed the fabric of life.<sup>8</sup>

Cinema was the single most inclusive cultural horizon in which the traumatic effects of modernity were reflected, rejected or disavowed, transmuted or negotiated. Both Walter Benjamin and Kracauer saw that cinema was capable of a reflexive relation with modernity and modernization. Kracauer saw cinema as a "self-representation of the masses subject to the process of mechanization."<sup>9</sup> Cinema suggested this possibility because it attracted and made visible to itself and society an emerging, heterogeneous mass public ignored and despised by dominant culture. It not only traded in the mass production of the senses but also provided an aesthetic horizon for the experience of industrial mass society.<sup>10</sup>

The first film to be examined in the context of the conditions of modernity as mentioned above is *Sunrise* a 1927 film directed by F.W. Murnau. Murnau was a German expressionist filmmaker who had just immigrated to America from the Weimar republic and was famous for films such as *Nostalgia*. Based on Sudermann's "The Trip to Tilsit", *Sunrise* is the tale of a farmer's affair with a woman from the city. 1927 was pre-depression boom time in America; it was a time of mass movement to the cities, of uncontrolled capitalism and mass consumption. This is a dialectical film and critiques the effect of the conditions of modernity through a series of oppositions between sunrise and sunset, the country and the city, good and evil, salvation and sin, divine

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 30-34

<sup>9</sup> Miriam Hansen, "A self representation of the masses: Siegfried Kracauer's curious Americanisms", in *Weimar Publics/Weimar Subjects: Rethinking the Political Culture of Germany in the 1920s*, edited by Kathleen Canning, Kerstin Barndt & Kristin McGuire, (Oxford : Berghahn:2010)

<sup>10</sup> Miriam Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism", in *Modernism/Modernity*, Volume 6 No. 2, April 1999

grace and black magic, natural and unnatural acts, and finally the blonde beatific wife and the dark sultry city woman in her struggle for the man's soul.<sup>11</sup> The woman from the city is individualistic, only cares about herself and will go to any lengths to get what she wants even murder; she has no morals and is quite brazen. She is opposite everything that the country stands for, in the peasant home where she stays the deformed lighting of the tilted lamp underscores the degree which her presence warps the simple country existence of her hosts. Corrupted by the city she seduces the husband with tales of the excitement and wild abandon of the city. This sexualised vamp is the precursor of the femme fatale (see Fig. 1). When she dances at the swamp and convinces the husband to kill the wife this could be read as a psychological narrative that appreciates the forces of sexual instinct and the libido.<sup>12</sup> She is the dialectic of the wife who is pious, good, cares about her family, and seems almost angelic (see Fig. 2).

The city/ country dichotomy is in many ways a metaphor for dialectic between modern and traditional way of life. The countryside is slow moving, there is a sense of security and it still has a sense of community, and the family unit is the mainstay of life. The discourse of the happy couple living in the country is imbued with nostalgia- a tone associated in the film with the flashback of the couple shown content on their farm, relaxing with their child. This scene could resemble the utopian view in traditional landscape painting (see Fig. 3). The city is tied to the figure of the home-wrecking woman from the city and thus is given considerable negative weight as a place where traditional morals no longer exist.<sup>13</sup> The scene in the barber shop when the wife is hit on by the sleazy guy while watching her husband having a shave is another example of this. However the city is also shown as a place of great excitement and surprise. People are mostly friendly and good natured, they seem to enjoy life and there seems to be a sense that in cities like these that the American dream is still alive. It is the city that rejuvenates the couple's marriage.

*Sunrise* contains remarkable sequences that depict movement in modern urban spaces and utilizes avant-garde or experimental techniques such as extended camera movements, superimpositions, and rhythmic editing patterns in these depictions. The

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<sup>11</sup> Brad Prager, "Taming Impulses: Murnau's *Sunrise* and the Exorcism of Expressionism", in *Literature Film Quarterly*, 2000, Vol. 28 Issue 4

<sup>12</sup> Prager, "Taming Impulses"

<sup>13</sup> Lucy Fischer, *Sunrise A Song of Two Humans*, (London, British Film Institute: 1998), 39

modern metropolis subjected the individual to a barrage of powerful impressions, shocks and jolts and changed the texture of his everyday life.<sup>14</sup> The urban sequences show a fascination with the perceptual transformations of modernity. Beyond visualizing urban modernity, these sequences work to recreate the intense perceptual experience produced by various modern urban spaces full of movement. The scenes in the streets and the amusements parks use the perceptual conditions of modernity are used for spectacular effect. *Sunrise* engages with the experience of modernity through camerawork that exploits the movement inherent to certain modern urban spaces. This corresponds to Walter Benjamin's understanding of the potential of cinema. "The mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence" and "Film corresponds to profound changes in the apperceptive apparatus, changes that are experienced on an individual scale by the man in the street in big-city traffic, on a historical scale by every present-day citizen."<sup>15</sup>

Marshall Berman defines modernity as attempts by modern men and women to get a grip on the modern world and make themselves at home in it, *Sunrise* could be viewed in these terms as the farmer and his wife make their way from the Old World to the New, endeavouring to accommodate themselves to its possibilities and perils.<sup>16</sup> If *Sunrise* gives us a mixed view of the city as a place of dubious morals, a place of shocks and thrills, it still has some utopian potential. *The Big Sleep* which was filmed in 1944 and released in 1946 gives us a whole different impression of the modern city, in which the metropolis has turned to a necropolis. There was no more shock of the new in cities, people were totally used to their new environments, alienation, angst were the norm and a moral rot had set in. *The Big Sleep* fits loosely into the style of film noir.

Film noir is said to be identified by its visual style: low-key lighting; the use of chiaroscuro effects; strongly marked camera angles; jarring and off balance shot composition; tight framing and close ups that produce a claustrophobic sense of containment. The films are predominantly urban, the action taking place at night to produce a strong contrast between the enveloping dark and intermittent pools of

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<sup>14</sup> Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity*, 35

<sup>15</sup> Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, in *Illuminations/Walter Benjamin*, edited by Hannah Arendt, (London, Pimlico: 1999), 227

<sup>16</sup> Fischer, *Sunrise*, 40

light.<sup>17</sup> The era of film noir was a particularly disruptive time in American history: after a ten year depression, the forties began with war and ended with a congressional witch hunt for communists. Even though the war was fought on a foreign land American lives were severely changed by it. American cities were not bombed but the rhythm of daily life was upset by it.<sup>18</sup> While the U.S. cities were untouched by the second world war, their residents sitting rapt before the newsreel footage in their movie theatres were themselves bombarded with graphic images of the bombing of London, the pounding of Stalingrad, the carpet bombings of Dresden and Berlin and finally the mushroom clouds over Nagasaki and Hiroshima.<sup>19</sup> The war stimulated the US economy but the workforce was significantly different from what it had been before the war. Because men were needed in the armed service, women for the first time entered the jobs market in large numbers, and their place both at home and at work changed radically. Film noir reflects the new status of women in society. It transformed the new role of women into a negative image, noir saw the new woman forced by social circumstances and economic necessity to assert herself in ways not encouraged previously by her culture, emerge on screen as a wicked, scheming creature, sexually potent and deadly to the male. This image of women as amoral destroyers of male strength can be traced to the wartime reassignment of roles both at home and work.<sup>20</sup> Returning soldiers came home to find that their women folk had changed and in many ways the role of the femme fatale reflects the crisis in the male dominated culture of the time.

Film noir is the dark mirror reflecting the dark underside of American urban life-the subterranean city- from which much crime, high and low culture, raw sexual energy and deviations, and other elemental, ambiguous forces that fuel the greater society often spring. Every American city is a tale of two cities, the surface city orderly and functional, and its shadow the city full with darker impulses and forbidden currents, a world full of violence and chaos.<sup>21</sup> Such is the city that is portrayed in *The Big Sleep*. Los Angeles in this movie is a physical and moral sprawl, a chain of suburbs full of legal and illegal activities linked by wide boulevards. Marlow goes on a series of journeys across a

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<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Cowie, "Film Noir and Women", in *Shades of Noir*, edited by Joan Copjec, (London, Verso: 1993), 126

<sup>18</sup> Foster Hirsch, *Film Noir: The Darkside of the Screen*, (Philadelphia, Da Copa Press: 1981), 21

<sup>19</sup> Ibid 35

<sup>20</sup> Hirsch, *Film Noir: The Darkside of the Screen*, 21

<sup>21</sup> Ibid 36

mythical landscape of darkened bungalows, decaying office buildings, and sinister night spots. The viewer sees the action through Marlowe's point of view on a journey from one oppressive setting to the next. The downtown Los Angeles in which our hero finds himself couldn't be more claustrophobic. It is a collapsing, involuted landscape, architecturally and emotionally. The maze confronting him consists of rain-slicked streets and sidewalks, dank basements, twisting corridors, after-hours office buildings, swanky apartments filled with objects of art, and a suburban house with a corpse. Everywhere he goes shadows are elongated, stairwells winding, elevators dimly lit.<sup>22</sup> (See Fig. 4) There are no cops anywhere to be seen, except when they're pulling car with a stiff in it out of the water. There are no pedestrians or by-standers innocent or even neutral.

The way the film is shot and lit creates a fatalistic, angst filled mood. The majority of the scenes are lit for night. Gangsters sit in offices with the shades pulled and lights off. The use of oblique and vertical lines splinters the screen, making it restless and unstable. Light enters the dingy rooms in odd shapes. The actors and setting are given equal lighting emphasis. The central characters are often standing in the shadows. Giving the environment equal or greater weight than the actor creates a fatalistic hopeless mood. There is nothing the protagonist can do; the city will outlast and negate his best efforts.<sup>23</sup>

There is no interaction between people in this film except for economic interactions. This is reflective of alienation and isolation and breakdown in community of modern cities. There is no mention of family or friends. The one family in it is completely dysfunctional. Marlow the outsider seems to search for fleeting glimpses of compassion, of simple human feelings, but he is unwilling to be the first to betray such feelings in themselves.<sup>24</sup> There seems to be no morals and nothing but crime and corruption in this city. Everyone is out to make a quick buck. There is dialectic throughout the whole film between Marlowe who if not quite moral at least does the right thing, and the amoral men and women such as Carmen, Canino, Eddie Mars and Agnes. This throws a heavy

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<sup>22</sup> Nicholas Christopher, *Somewhere in the Night: Film Noir and the American City*, (New York, The Free Press: 1997), 5

<sup>23</sup> Paul Schrader, "Notes on Film Noir", in *Film Noir Reader*, edited by Alain Silver and James Ursini, (New York, Limelight Editions: 1998), 55

<sup>24</sup> Alain Silver, "The Big Sleep", in *Film Noir: The encyclopedia*, edited by Alain Silver et al., (New York, Overlook Duckworth: 2010), 34



pall of pessimism<sup>25</sup> over the films background characterisations which are broken only in Marlow's scenes with Vivian, and the loyal heroism of fall guy Harry Jones. Themes such as pornography, drugs, and ritualistic murder are also alluded to.

The use of technology such as the telephone heightens the already intense individual isolation and spiritual amputation of the noir city and gives an intensified sense of alienation. The *Big Sleep* is filled with telephones of all kinds: pay phones, office phones, bedside phones, restaurant and night club phones that are brought to your table. The telephone is the ultimate noir machine- personal yet impersonal.<sup>26</sup> In the film the car is yet another isolating urban device; there are many driving scenes throughout the film with the characters travelling between two sets of trouble or two emotional situations. Yet one feels that when driving around they are only fractionally connected to the surrounding city.<sup>27</sup>(See Fig. 5)

There are five female characters in the film: Vivian the tough femme-fatale who drinks, smokes, and likes to gamble but will do anything to save her sister; Carmen the loose woman who likes to get high, and is capable of killing if she doesn't get her way; Agnes is amoral, money-grabbing, corrupt to whom blackmail means nothing and for whom not one but two guys take the fall. Her first fall guy Joe Brody is symbolic of the crisis of confidence in within the contemporary male dominated culture of the time; The woman in the bookshop who is sexually liberated and spends a wet afternoon with Marlowe; The taxi driver who asked Marlowe to call her by night when he feels like having some fun. None of these women are portrayed in a positive light which is reflective of the crisis in the male dominated culture of the time.

John Houseman writing about *The Big Sleep* in 1947 said that what was significant and repugnant about the contemporary "tough" films of that time was their absolute lack of moral energy, their listless, fatalistic despair. The moral if any in the big sleep is that life in the United States of America in the year 1947 was hardly worth living at all. He also said that movies such as this present a fairly accurate reflection of the neurotic

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<sup>25</sup> Silver, "The Big Sleep", 34

<sup>26</sup> Christopher, *Somewhere in the Night*, 92

<sup>27</sup> Ibid 94

personality of the United States of America in that time.<sup>28</sup> This film is not as dark or hopeless as the film noir that was to come in the second half of the forties, where the hero usually doomed from the start. This is perhaps because it was a romantic noir in that it starred two of the first celebrity couple Bogart and Bacall. The critique of Benjamin that film could create a new kind of ideological magic through the cult of celebrity and techniques like the close-up that fetishized certain stars or images via the technology of the cinema<sup>29</sup>. Theodore Adorno calls this “conserving the aura as a foggy mist.”<sup>30</sup> Many people argue that *The Big Sleep* is noir lite as it has a kind of a happy ending. The final scene with Marlowe and Vivian huddled in the darkened parlour of Geiger’s house while the sound of approaching sirens is filled with an underlying irony. Visually the couple are surrounded by dark corners; aurally ominous sirens encroach on the romantic score; they stand all the while near the blood stain where it all started. Although they have both survived that violent chain reaction they cannot have been untouched by it.<sup>31</sup> (See Fig. 6)

The influence of Freud is to be seen in both films. *Sunrise* is not a film in which inner psychological states are externalised, the film instead takes the position that the subjective inner world is best left internal, that fantasy be allowed its own orderly private domain. It can be argued that sunrise is an anti-psychological film. The film asserts that one could liberate one’s self from the unconscious and the consequential distortions of subjective perspective that comes of having one. The film participates in the belief that one can successfully control instinctual life<sup>32</sup>. However in film noir characters are controlled by conscious and unconscious desires. There is a sense that the protagonists in these films are not totally in control of their actions but are subject to darker, inner impulses-at times they seem driven into a direct transgression with the law by some fatal flaw within themselves.<sup>33</sup> Marlowe is driven to put his life in danger

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<sup>28</sup> John Houseman, “Today’s Hero: A Review”, in *Hollywood Quarterly*, 1947 accessed online at <http://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=kt2f59q2dp&chunk.id=ss1.26&toc.depth=1&toc.id=ch07&brand=ucpress>

<sup>29</sup> Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural studies, identity and politics between the modern and the postmodern*, London: Routledge, 1995, 10

<sup>30</sup> Adorno, Theodore, ‘Culture Industry Reconsidered’ in *The Adorno Reader*, edited by Brian O Connor, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000.

<sup>31</sup> Silver, “The Big Sleep”, 34

<sup>32</sup> Prager, “Taming Impulses”

<sup>33</sup> Frank Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street, film noir, genre, masculinity*, (London, Routledge: 1994), 47

because of sexual desire, Carmen murders when she is rejected; two guys die because of their desire for Agnes. There are hints throughout the movie of all kinds of perversions. There is no repressing the unconscious in film noir.

This essay has investigated how the films *Sunrise* and *The Big Sleep* used the city to explore and critique the effects of the conditions of modernity on the people of those times. *Sunrise* was made during the roaring twenties which was a prosperous time in America and while the film is concerned on the effect of modernity and the city had on morals and family, there is still hope and the city still had utopian possibilities. *The Big Sleep* was made in 1944 and America had gone through profound changes: the depression, a huge upsurge in crime, World War Two. All these changes had profound effects on the American psych. Utopia turned to Dystopia. This is reflected by the alienation, angst, moral rot, crime depicted in the Los Angeles of *The Big Sleep*. This movie was just the beginning of noir; it was to get much more dark and hopeless in the noir movies of the late forties and early sixties. The city has continued to be an important character and reference point for reflecting the effect of changing times on humans with alienation and isolation reaching a peak in *Taxi Driver*, and dystopia moving out to another galaxy in *Blade Runner*.

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**Fig. 1.** The Woman From The City, from *Sunrise A Tale of Two Humans* (DVD)/ director F.W. Murnau, Fox Films 2008



**Fig. 2.** The Woman From The Country, from *Sunrise A Tale of Two Humans* (DVD)/ director F.W. Murnau, Fox Films 2008



**Fig. 3** The Happy Family, from *Sunrise A Tale of Two Humans* (DVD)/ director F.W. Murnau, Fox Films 2008



**Fig. 4.** Mean Streets, from *The Big Sleep* (DVD)/ director Howard Hawks, Turner Entertainment Co., 2000



**Fig. 5.** The Car Instrument of Alienation. *The Big Sleep* (DVD)/ director Howard Hawks, Turner Entertainment Co., 2000



**Fig. 6.** A Happy Ending. *The Big Sleep* (DVD)/ director Howard Hawks, Turner Entertainment Co., 2000

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