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# Diurnal and Nocturnal Cityscapes in *Miami Vice*

Jean Du Verger

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There's trouble on the street tonight  
I can feel it in my bones  
I had a premonition  
that he should not go alone  
I knew the gun was loaded  
but I didn't think he'd kill  
ev'rything exploded and the  
blood began to spill [...]

“Smuggler’s Blues”, Glenn Frey

- 1 *Miami Vice*, which ran for five seasons on NBC between 1984 and 1989, was probably one of the most influential and pivotal television series of its time. As Steven Sanders aptly remarks, the show “helped to define 1980s popular culture<sup>1</sup>”. The show’s striking visual effects and its innovative use of music – which earned the series its nickname, “MTV Cops<sup>2</sup>” – contributed to its great popular success and its aesthetic appeal. However, while the show bore the inheritance of *film noir*<sup>3</sup> – notably *Night and the City* (1950) directed by Jules Dassin or *The Big Combo* (1955) directed by Joseph H. Lewis – as well as *neo-noir*<sup>4</sup> films such as Burt Reynolds’s *Sharky’s Machine* (1981) or Brian De Palma’s *Scarface* (1983), it also broke with the traditional conventions of police series. But more surprisingly, the show played a critical part in the city’s revival as it led to the enactment of legal protections for the district’s buildings and the implementation of urban renovation programmes.
- 2 Crime is, as David Buxton notes, “a constant, pervasive part of the urban experience<sup>5</sup>”. The present article will focus on the show’s first two seasons and explore the diurnal and nocturnal representations of urban spaces. These representations convey a sense of alienation and emptiness characteristic of the postmodern metropolitan experience in the 1980s, while also offering today’s viewers a rather accurate picture of the Reagan

years. The show walks the viewer through the city of Miami, where gleaming buildings are juxtaposed to slums, thus reflecting the city's social divide. Consequently, as the show's creator Anthony Yerkovich asserts, the city of Miami clearly appears to be one of the series's central characters. Moreover, the show's visual and sensory experience in the urban space rests on the constant oscillation between light and darkness, day and night. This oscillation gives shape to the show's main plotline that depicts the predicament of two police detectives (Sonny Crockett and Ricardo Tubbs) who are caught in the interstices between law enforcement and the underworld. As the narrative unfolds, we see how both characters are constantly at risk of being engulfed into the dark abyss of crime and corruption while they tread the shadowy borderline between good and evil.

- 3 I will first highlight the role of Miami as the show's main protagonist. I will then try to decipher the possible readings of the show's diurnal urban text<sup>6</sup> before considering, through a series of close readings of certain key episodes, the city's nightscape in the context of its *noir* and *neo-noir* influences.

## 1- The Main Protagonist: Miami

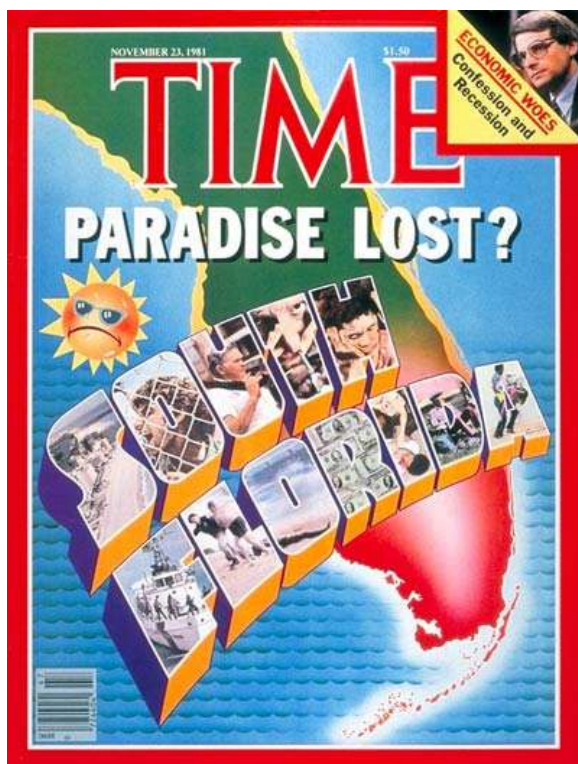
- 4 The 1980s were, as James Lyons notes, "a transitional decade for television"<sup>7</sup>. As of the mid-eighties, the influence of the Classic Networks began waning due to the growing competition of cable, satellite, VCRs and the nascent video industry. The American television networks were therefore impelled to renew their TV series both aesthetically as well as in terms of content. *Miami Vice*, which premiered on NBC on 16 September 1984, was characterized by its compelling visual style due to the use of cinematic and stylistic devices such as overhead shots, tilted angles, slow-motion<sup>8</sup>, handheld sequences and freeze frame endings. The show's visual imagery was enhanced by Michael Mann's "technical virtuosity and visual artistry"<sup>9</sup>. The use of expressionist *noir* lighting and electric colours imprinted a distinctive stamp on the series, not to mention the innovative use of music, which foregrounded music-directed action. The lighting effects conveyed "the ambiguity of personal identity and the threatening nature of the noir universe"<sup>10</sup>. The Manichean opposition scheme with the subtle mixture of light and darkness reflected the deep existential struggle of the two heroes Sonny Crockett (Don Johnson) and Ricardo Tubbs (Philip Michael Thomas).
- 5 Through a close reading of certain key episodes of the show I hope to decrypt how the directors thrust the city of Miami into the spotlight, thus highlighting the show's impact on the city's profile as well as on American society by and large. I will therefore challenge critics and cultural commentators who have been inclined to perceive the show as a vehicle for style rather than content<sup>11</sup>.
- 6 As the 1970s melted into the 1980s, Miami's population became younger and more ethnically mixed due to the steady influx of immigrants from Latin America. From May to September 1980, some 125,000 Cuban immigrants arrived in Miami with the consent of Fidel Castro on a flotilla of privately chartered boats. The Mariel Boatlift episode is depicted in the opening part of Brian de Palma's film *Scarface* (1983) (figure 1).

Fig. 1: *Scarface* (1983) directed by Brian de Palma



- 7 The failure of the “Marielitos”, the plight of minorities and dispossessed people living in depressed areas, the “Liberty City Riots”<sup>12</sup>, not to mention the wars between rival drug gangs<sup>13</sup> that were escalating, had a dreadful effect on Miami’s image. Consequently, this dramatic wave of events ruined the old vision of the sunny resort where old-age pensioners played shuffleboard or cards in the warmth and tranquility of the city. In November 1981, *Time*’s magazine cover story on South Florida read: “Paradise Lost” (figure 2).

Fig. 2: *The Time*’s cover in November 1981



- 8 The once “Magic City” had fallen, and Metropolitan Miami was portrayed as a highly violent and corrupt city that reverberated “the jungle of big American cities<sup>14</sup>”. The show’s creator, Anthony Yerkovich, said in an interview he gave to *Time* magazine in September 1985 that he wanted “a city in which the American dream had been distilled into something perverse. [...] I wanted to use the city [of Miami] figuratively and metaphorically. I wanted to place an existential hero in a city based on greed<sup>15</sup>”. As the show explores the city’s criminal underworld it dwells on vast array of social ills: prostitution (“Florence, Italy” S02E16), incest (“Junk Love” S02E06), rape (“Bought and Paid For” S02E09), pornography (“Heart of Darkness” S01E03), drugs (“Give a Little, Take a Little” S01E11; “Little Prince” S01E12; “The Dutch Oven” S02E04), drug trafficking (“Milk Run” S01E13; “Yankee Dollar” S02E13) and corruption (“Smuggler’s Blues” S01E16).
- 9 *Miami Vice* was not the first show to take place in an American metropolis. *The Streets of San Francisco* (ABC, 1972-1978), *Kojak* (CBS, 1973-1977) or *Vega\$*, which aired on ABC from 1978 to 1981<sup>16</sup>, had also dwelled on urban existence in America’s concrete jungles using them as a background for their narratives. A show like *Kojak* bestowed an effect of realism to the police genre as it pinpointed the social dimension of crime, upholding the idea that the city was a dangerous and hostile place, while portraying crime as endemic in modern society<sup>17</sup>. Location became, as Buxton points out astutely, “an important part of the assemblage, allowing standardised stories of police to be ‘coloured’ by the particularity of a city<sup>18</sup>”. But for Michael Mann, the city of Miami was not a mere backdrop but “a character in its own right<sup>19</sup>”. As the series unfolds, the city insinuates itself seamlessly into the shows cleverly constructed narrative fabric as a number of the series’ titles attest to: “Glades” (S1E09); “Definitely Miami” (S2E12) and “Miami Squeeze” (S5E11). The show goes on to explore the changes in a city that had become by the mid-eighties the “hub of the drug trade between Latin America and the rest of the country<sup>20</sup>”. Thus, the realistic sense of place came as a critical extension of Crocket and Tubbs’s battle against crime and moral corruption as they constantly move between two worlds, between the realms of deceptive appearances and bleak reality, between day and night. Miami served therefore not only as an ideal backdrop to the two detectives’s undercover investigations, but also as the show’s main protagonist.

## 2- Diurnal Readings of the Urban Text

- 10 *Miami Vice* used South Beach as a site for many of its early episodes, namely Ocean Drive, the Atlantis condominium with its signature sky patio, Arquitectonica’s private postmodern residence (Spear House or “Pink House”), which is located on the outskirts of South Beach, alongside numerous other iconic locales such as Biscayne Bay or the Everglades. Michael Mann used, as a matter of fact, quite a few of the locations and architectural features Brian de Palma had used in *Scarface*. The show’s visual artistry and cinematic quality highlighted the city’s sharp lines, sensuous curves and bold geometry, reshaping Miami into a sharply delineated character. The visual and aural aspects of the show created a number of significant scenes as they used locations for social and cultural conflicts contributing to the intricacy of the show’s narrative texture. The juxtaposition of vernacular architecture, Art Deco and postmodern architecture establishes a specific atmosphere that puts Miami’s uniqueness into sharp relief providing the viewer with not only one but many cityscapes. Shutz and

MacGregor remark that Michael Mann and the show's art director, Jeffrey Howard, paid great attention to the sense of place and stylization of Miami. Howard greatly contributed to give *Miami Vice* its visual character as he strove "to eliminate mundane settings and replace them with spectacular ones<sup>21</sup>". The pastel colours<sup>22</sup>, which were characteristic of the first two seasons, with the predominance of blues and greens, reflected the series's "coolness in tone<sup>23</sup>". The importance of colour schemes was humorously summarized by the "lovable idiosyncratic snitch"<sup>24</sup> Izzy Moreno (Martin Ferrero) in "Phil the Shill" (S2E11). While addressing one of Phil Mayhew's guests, Izzy tells him disdainfully: "What are you doing wearing those brown shoes? This party is color cooperated<sup>25</sup>". Furthermore, Howard claims that the "summer sun in South Florida is a palpable force. Optically, it has a bleaching effect. This is the conceptual underpinning of our pastels<sup>26</sup>". Yet, beneath this aspetized environment loom dark and swampy forces, as Howard remarks, the show's atmosphere "exists on a borderline between respectability and venality, honor and criminality<sup>27</sup>". The sun's bleaching effect blurs the boundaries between morality and corruption, law enforcement and crime, picturing Miami as a "city on the edge<sup>28</sup>".

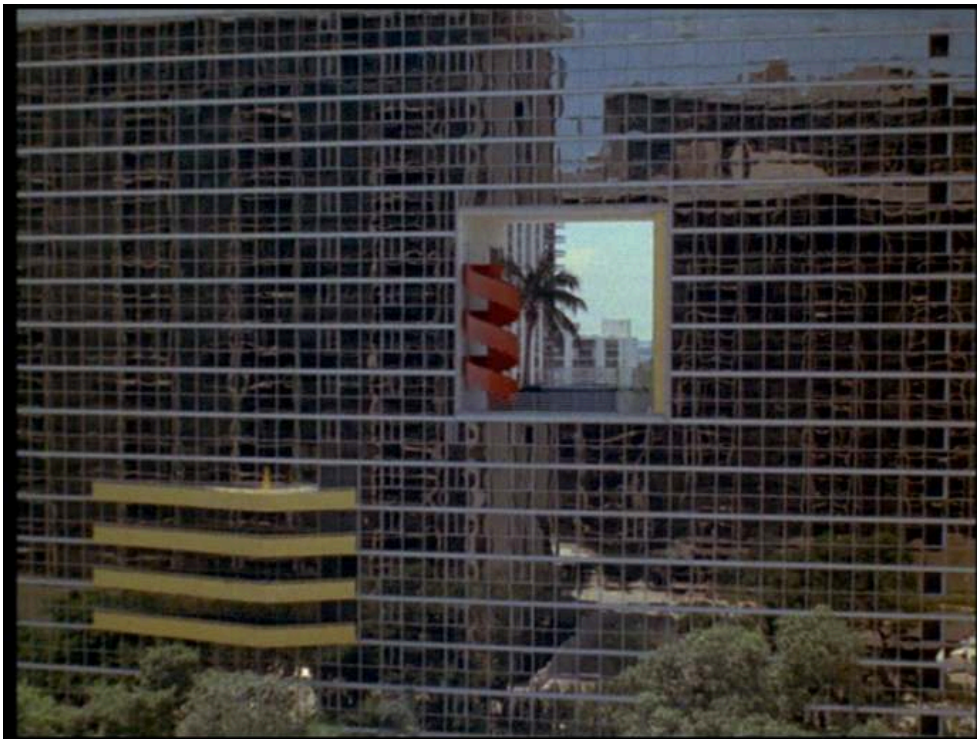
- 11 The show's opening and closing credits frame the series' narratives<sup>29</sup>. The opening credits are preceded by an opening sequence or "cold open", which is designed to ensure that the audience is drawn quickly into the narrative's events. The opening credits represent the metropolitan space, which is viewed as a highly coloured and brightly lit setting of fast-paced activities. More importantly, contrary to the opening credits of other crime shows, there is no visual trace of the police in *Miami Vice*'s opening titles<sup>30</sup>. However, following the *noir* tradition in which nightfall is often conjoined with the appearance of water, the credits end with a view of the city's nighttime skyline taken from the harbour. The dissolve draws the viewer back into the narrative. The shift from day to night could therefore stand metaphorically as an indication that the viewer will be travelling from light to darkness. The montage sequences, which are mainly made of shots of settings taken from various episodes of the first two seasons, tend to convey an impression of fragmentation. The reverberation effect created by the close-up of the buildings, the aerial shots of the water, the speedboats race, glamorous-looking women and luxurious cars all convey an impression of speed, glamour and shallowness rather than tranquility, reality and depth<sup>31</sup>. These visual fragments – splinters of the American Dream – compose a pattern that foregrounds Miami as the show's main character. Indeed, unlike the opening credits of *The Streets of San Francisco*, *Kojak* or *Vega*<sup>32</sup>, none of the show's main actors are seen in the opening titles. The city of Miami acts as a conditioning factor on the fiction as it becomes a protagonist which, unlike the human characters, is not a fictional one. In the closing credits, the unbroken chains of buildings along South Beach are filmed using long shots. Compared to the opening credits, the camera zooms away providing the viewer with a sense of perspective. The viewers can thus distance themselves from the glittering settings displayed in the opening credits. While the viewer witnesses the city undergoing its latest cycle of redevelopment and renewal (i.e., the construction sites)<sup>33</sup>, the camera pans the background, providing the viewer with patches of open landscape. The "pre-credits grabber that open every episode<sup>34</sup>" often plunges the viewer into a bleak vision of the urban world that sharply contrasts with the visual imagery displayed in the opening credits, indicating to the attentive viewer that things are not what they seem in the city of Miami, thus offering an apter translation of reality. We may therefore interpret the closing credits's use of perspective as a



metaphorical testimony of the show's social and cultural dimension, the role of which is to inform the viewers by providing them with keys needed to understand the reality that lies beyond the city's glitter and gold<sup>35</sup>. Both opening and closing credits thus refract and re-construct the spectator's impressions on the city.

- 12 Miami is awash with blazing sunshine. The recurrent images of beaches and oiled bodies lying on the sand or vast swimming pools reflect the pervasive, glaring sunshine. During the “teaser” of the episode entitled “Calderone’s Return: The Hit List” (S1E05) Crockett and Tubbs are seen carrying out surveillance detail on a drug dealer, Felix Castranova, who lives in one of the city’s iconic locations, the Atlantis condominium designed by the architectural firm Arquitectonica<sup>36</sup>. Beyond the glamorous aspect of the building, the Atlantis condominium stands as a metaphor for postmodernism. The building is experienced frontally; its glazed façade reverberates the sunlight preventing onlookers from seeing through its transparent surface. Detectives Stan Zwitek (Michael Talbott) and Larry Zito (John Diehl), who have relieved Crockett and Tubbs, can only see the people sitting on a balcony or the young women wearing bathing suits and walking down the building’s red spiral staircase or standing by the jacuzzi. The scene focuses on the limits of police surveillance, as the interior remains invisible to the onlookers. Reflected sunlight seems to symbolise Mann’s view concerning the lack of depth of Miami’s culture in the 1980s (figure 3), as the glaring sun limits access to subtle meanings and deep truths.

Fig. 3: The Atlantis condominium



- 13 Everything is superficial as Miami seems to be a matter of texture and surface for Mann. Police surveillance is a recurrent narrative device in the show<sup>37</sup>. The scene evokes aspects of scolophilia and voyeurism<sup>38</sup> that are underscored by the way in which the camera pauses on the visual tropes of surveillance (tape-recorders, cameras and the captadiotric lens) (figure 4).



Fig. 4: Visual tropes of surveillance

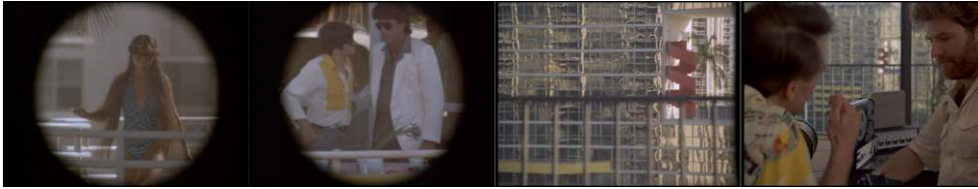


- 14 This scene, which may well be an echo of the surveillance scenes in Burt Reynold's neo-noir film *Sharky's Machine* (1981), resonates with multiple cultural significations (figure 5).

Fig. 5: Burt Reynold's film *Sharky's Machine* (1981)

- 15 The first segment of the scene focuses on the distance between the detectives and the coke dealer, underscoring the ideological significance of urban spatiality as an arena of potential conflict. But the scene also hints at a society of voyeurism in which surveillance has become spectacle. The window through which Tubbs, Zwikte and Zito are keeping an eye on the dealer provides a warped connection between the viewer and the viewed. By peeping at the female bodies through the catadioptric lens, Tubbs and Zwikte shatter the illusory distance between the characters's gaze in the narrative and that of the spectators (figure 6).

Fig. 6: Tubbs and Zwick peeping at the female bodies



- 16 Tubbs's and Zwick's eyes give way to the viewer's gaze as both fictional and real worlds conflate. Voyeurism detracts Zwick and Zito from their actual surveillance task; while both detectives focus their attention on glamorous mirages and delusional visions of beauty, they are unable to foresee what is about to happen before their eyes.
- 17 The city's social space is, as I have previously mentioned, a contested one. At the time, according to Mann, the rich lived in postmodern, futuristic buildings, while the poor lived in Art Deco ones. While Mann's opinion did not quite correspond to the reality, it nevertheless influenced the way in which he filmed the city of Miami. The show sheds light on the pockets of poverty and degradation: the "cold open" of "Glades" (S1E09) for instance, dwells on a run-down part of the red-light district (figure 7).

Fig. 7: Pockets of poverty and degradation



- 18 In "The Maze" (S1E17), Ricardo Tubbs is taken hostage by a gang of Hispanic youths – the Escobars – in the run-down Blue Waters Art Deco hotel of the 1940s-1950s, along with a group of squatters and immigrant families from Latin America and Haiti. As the camera pans from the ocean front and the amazingly purple light of Miami dawn to the derelict hotel – located at 7212 San Domingo –, the contrast between the vision of the paradisiacal landscape and the reality of the abandoned building is thrown into sharp relief (figure 8).

Fig. 8: The contrast between the paradisiacal landscape and the abandoned building



- 19 The viewer's gaze has been rapidly directed from an allusion to the city's fun-in-the-sun reputation<sup>39</sup> to the dark side of the American Dream. The contrast is marked by a grey asphalt road that stands as a dividing line between both locations. The building's white façade adds to the effect of monochrome reality, while reflecting the city's downward drive. As the narrative unfolds, we see neighbours arguing through broken windows or throwing garbage and dirty wastewater out of them. The homeless

squatters, who seem trapped in the building, look like prisoners of sorts. The use of a long lens works to flatten the space of the façade helps reduce the sense of depth (figure 9).

Fig. 9: The building's prison-like façade



- 20 The scene is therefore endowed with an almost pictorial quality conveying the impression we are viewing a bordered painting in which the numerous windows morph into as many miniature frames through which the onlooker can observe the people occupying the hotel. While Tubbs walks through the building, the camera ponders on the state of the hotel's crumbling interior and the graffiti-coated walls. The dirty walls enhance the oppressive and claustrophobic effect. The dark and filthy corridors contrast with the patches of the cloudless cerulean sky that are visible through the partially barricaded or barred window frames which look as if postcards had been inserted into the building's walls. As the hostages get to know each other, they progressively unveil the reality of their situation. We learn through Georges that there is "plenty of work" but with "[n]o card" he is unable to work for a living. One of the gang members Elio Escobar, who is about to rape Georges's sister Gabriela, tells her "You don't exist. Just like me". The "Land of Opportunity", an expression that drug dealers or criminals refer to recurrently throughout the two first seasons, does not seem to offer any opportunity to those surviving at the margins of the American dream. Before the final assault, there is a view of the decaying hotel and the attached block of low row houses that are dwarfed by an imposing new modern compound set in the background. The scene conveys a sharp contrast between the rich and poor areas of the city that coexist side by side. The bottom wall of the new building displays the social segregation within the city. The wall seems, as a matter of fact, to be there to prevent those living on the outside from accessing the American Dream.
- 21 Architectural representations form a lexicon of structures that Mann uses subtly as he cleverly resorts to an elaborate vocabulary of space. In "Smuggler's Blues" (S1E16), for instance, architecture is made to reflect human behaviour as it partakes in the construction of the characters' identities following the idea that certain types of urban space can determine individuals. Castillo's team meet up in an abandoned building with a DEA agent named Ed Waters. The undercover activities of Crockett and Tubbs pose the question of distinguishing between crime and criminal justice as their undercover work is "both covert and deceptive"<sup>40</sup>. Consequently, Tubbs and Crockett's undercover operations are assimilated to illegal activities. The location – on the fringes of the city limits – stands here as the encroachment of a liminal space<sup>41</sup> in which formerly fixed roles have become fluid as Castillo's team moves from the stable urban centre – where

the Organized Crime Bureau is located – to the city’s social margins of the deserted building. Their move signals that the altering of Crockett and Tubbs’ identities into those of Burnett and Cooper is betokened by environmental degradation. The boarded-up buildings and the urban decay constitute a corrupting criminal environment where illegal activities flourish and criminality thrives. In these urban spaces, disorder is common as surveillance capacities are minimized, and criminals feel that their chances of being identified by the law are rather low. Hence, the border between police and illegal activities are blurred, and the viewer is constantly left wondering if Crockett and Tubbs will eventually cross the red line. In “Florence, Italy” (S2E16), the urban landscape morphs as we move from day to night. The same street segment is barely recognizable in broad daylight compared to its nocturnal texture (figure 10).

Fig. 10: From the diurnal to nocturnal cityscape



- 22 It is as if the setting were entirely different, creating an impression of dynamization of the urban space as the shift from the diurnal to nocturnal cityscape fleshes out the transient and elusive nature of urban surroundings. During daytime, the social and cultural contrasts are obviously far more vivid than at nighttime when they tend to dissolve in the surrounding darkness. Hence, Mann’s use of architecture and urban space provides the reader-viewer with a vast array of textual readings.

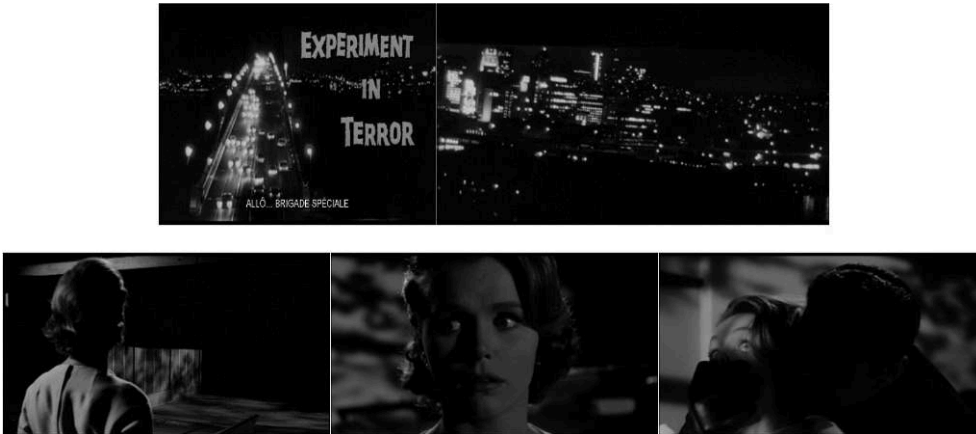
### 3- The City at Night: From Babylon to Jerusalem

- 23 *Miami Vice* resonates with themes derived from classic *noir* and *neo-noir*. The show shares some key features with *film noir*: moral ambiguity, confusion of identity, sexual obsession and a form of mental insanity. The city nightscape is a locus of *noir* entrapment, a treacherous urban terrain depicted in *film noir*, namely Jules Dassin’s *Night and the City* (1950) or Joseph H. Lewis’s *The Big Combo* (1955), not to mention Blake Edwards’ *neo-noir* film *Experiment in Terror* (1962) (figures 11, 12 and 13) in which the camera’s pressure conveys an impression of psychological containment that enhances the film’s claustrophobic atmosphere.

Fig. 11: Joseph H. Lewis’s *The Big Combo* (1955)





Fig. 12: Jules Dassin's *Night and City* (1950)Fig. 13: Blake Edwards' *Experiment in Terror* (1962)

- 24 In all three films, the city's nocturnal landscape plays a major role in their narrative structures. Miami's nocturnal landscape is shown in a subtly stylized way as the use of lighting underscores significant settings while establishing an eerie atmosphere. The dramatic use of light and shade visually reflect the violent contrasts of psychological unrest, conveying what French critics Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton describe as a "certain malaise"<sup>42</sup>. In *Miami Vice*, the city nightscape prominently features dark streets, which are often deserted, dimly lit alleys, downtown bars, classy nightclubs, restaurants and seedy hotel rooms. The red-light district, with its prostitutes and pimps, teems with the glittering marquees of adult theatres, adult book stores, liquor stores and sex shops<sup>43</sup>. The show's nighttime imagery and urban landscapes portray the city as a dangerous place, a hostile environment in which corruption and amorality strive<sup>44</sup>. While the noirish implications of the show reflect the *Zeitgeist* of the eighties, *Miami Vice* also grafts a number of tropes from classic *film noir* that enhance the feeling of alienation and danger exuded by the nocturnal urban space that opens onto a world of darkness and noirish expectations<sup>45</sup>.
- 25 The postmodern nightscape of *Miami Vice* forms a narrative structure that is marked by different experiences of benighted individuals struggling to fend off implacable threats or temptations, as they confront both the strangeness of others as well as the strange otherness within themselves. Furthermore, the city nightscape is multi-faceted and offers the viewer a comprehensive vision of the city's underworld. The social and cultural boundaries dissolve within the crowded glossy enclosed space of the nightclubs. The nightclub is also shown as a space of transgression. In "Back in the World" (S2E10), Tubbs and Zwick descend into the city's sexual underground while investigating a nightclub as they seek information on heroin traffickers. During their nocturnal investigation, Zwick is wearing a leather peaked cap, a leather jacket and

pants, an obvious reference to the gay leather subculture, and a possible echo of William Friedkin's film *Cruising* (1980), while the imposing bartender turns out to be a transvestite (figure 14).

Fig. 14: The city's sexual underground



- 26 The nightclub also offers a space in which to hide out and conceal or transform one's identity. In "The Dutch Oven" (S2E04), Trudy (Olivia Brown) has been invited by her boyfriend David to a party, where she witnesses guests smoking pot and snorting cocaine (figure 15), while a pop singer (David Johansen)<sup>46</sup> is prancing about on stage singing "King of Babylon", a perfect example of the way music comments action in the show's narrative.

Fig. 15: Guests smoking pot



- 27 The term Babylon is obviously referring here to a decadent fallen world, a world in which corruption, greed and sin prevail<sup>47</sup>. This specific segment and its biblical reference underline the corrupt and corrupting nature of nighttime parties which turn out to cover small as well as large drug deals.
- 28 This article ends with a close examination of the risks of disorientation and dislocation that characterize the postmodern cityscape. Through a close reading of certain scenes that were incorporated into the visual text of the pilot "Brother's Keeper" (S1E01-2) and "Little Miss Dangerous" (S2E15), I hope to show how both episodes underscore the ideological and metaphorical significance of the show's nocturnal urban spatiality. In "Brother's Keeper", the episode opens with Tubbs sitting alone in his car parked on a dark New York street. He is following a Columbian drug dealer, Esteban Calderon (Miguel Pinero). As the narrative unfolds, we discover through a series of flashbacks that the latter murdered Tubbs's brother, who was working undercover for the NYPD's Narcotics Division. Having followed Calderon into a nightclub he then loses him. As he emerges from the club's back entrance, he just has time to realize that Calderon has vanished into thin air. I would like to ponder briefly over this scene for which James Lyons offers an extremely convincing interpretation: "the outline of the two sidewalks form symmetrical diagonal of kerbstone that stretch back to a central vanishing point, disappearing in the dark, and creating a vortex that threatens to suck Tubbs into the murky abyss"<sup>48</sup> (figure 16).



Fig. 16: The two sidewalks forming a symmetrical diagonal of kerbstone stretching back to a central vanishing point



- 29 The trope will resurface at the end of the episode when Tubbs chases Calderon in a shipyard in the middle of the night. The silence and stillness, the use of shadows and the muted patterns of *chiaroscuro* enhance the scene's dramatic intensity, as both the faces of Tubbs and Calderon fade in and out of view into the darkness (figure 17).

Fig. 17: The faces of Tubbs and Calderon fading into the darkness



- 30 The characters and objects seem to be losing their consistency as they blend into the circumambient darkness evoking a growing feeling of disorientation, while contributing to the scene's eerie mood. The viewer is plunged into forbidden territory. When both characters finally meet face to face, the intensity is such that the viewer is, for a short while, under the impression that Tubbs's thirst for vengeance will overcome his sense of duty.
- 31 The episode entitled "Little Miss Dangerous" (S2E15) depicts a "dark urban world of neurotic entrapment"<sup>49</sup> in which sex is lethal. Jackie McSeidan (Fiona Eileen Flanagan) and her boyfriend Cat (Larry Joshua) work as S&M performers at Sex World, a club in Miami's red-light district. Jackie, who also does prostitution on the side, turns out to be a disturbed serial killer who murders her johns before leaving a childlike crayon-style drawing behind. Hence her nickname, the "crayon killer". In the pre-credit sequence, the viewer actually sees Jackie having sex with a sailor before stabbing him to death in the Anchor Hotel. Cat knows of Jackie's terrible secret, but he is madly in love with her, even though she refuses to marry him. After another murder occurs, and having noticed that Jackie has not come home, Cat begins scouring the city's shadowy streets, stairwells, sidewalks and underpasses in search of her. The high-angle long shot is an oppressive and fatalistic angle that looks down upon the lost and helpless character of Cat, who is pictured like a rat in a maze (figure 18), as he is filmed roaming the dimly lit alleys and the rain-slicked streets in search for the girl he loves.

Fig. 18: Cat roaming the dimly lit alleys



- 32 The episode also reflects “an advanced consumer society [that] is viceful because consumption is no longer utilitarian and uplifting but extravagant, superfluous, desirous<sup>50</sup>”. When Jackie tells Cat and Tubbs that “[s]ex doesn’t affect me. I’m just a physical substitute”, she clearly views her body as a mere object of consumption in a series of adult transactions. Consequently, her character takes on the signifiers of a discourse that underlines the commodification of the female body. The character of Jackie also stands for the spider woman determined to snare unwary men into her web. Her suicide illustrates what Borde and Chaumeton say of the *femme fatale*: she is “frustrated and criminal-minded, partly destructive, partly destroyed, hunted down, she [finally] falls, trapped by her own ploys<sup>51</sup>”. In this episode, the nighttime urban landscape accentuates the city’s moral corruption. As I mentioned previously, buildings are composed of a system of signs constructing a code through which they can be read. Consequently, the opposition between the nocturnal and diurnal cityscape reflecting the contrast between good and evil are fleshed out in the architectural opposition between the Sex World theatre and the Organized Crime Bureau<sup>52</sup> (figure 19).

Fig. 19: The architectural opposition between the Sex World theatre and the Organized Crime Bureau



- 33 When the camera pans the front of the Sex World theatre with its pink light-coloured façade, the building looms in amidst the neon-lights of the red-light district like a phallic shaped building. Hence, the towering public building that houses the OCB – which takes up half a city block and the street that runs perpendicular to it – stands out in stark contrast to the theatre as if it were the city’s ultimate protector, alone in its white concrete armour, beset on all sides by the menacing forces of crime, deprivation and corruption.
- 34 To conclude, the thematic threads of the show weave existentialist and postmodern themes together. *Miami Vice* therefore offers the viewers a reflection on the dark side of the human condition in a world of deceptive appearances – a fallen world in which “the circulation of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ commodities merges into an economy of desire<sup>53</sup>”. The urban cityscape of Miami is envisaged here as “a site of spectatorship”<sup>54</sup> staging a

postmodern drama. The urban space is perceived as an organic fabric that has a mosaic and fractal form offering a kaleidoscopic picture of the city, operating around the subtle oscillation between day and night. If at first glance the show may seem to rest on the simplistic oppositions between day and night, surface and underneath, sunny appearance and dark core, a close reading shows that a subtle use of cinematic devices, and a rather complex narrative structure, creates a world in which there are no clear boundaries between the diurnal or nocturnal spaces themselves. The show mingles style and content: one cannot work without the other. While the series clearly bore the inheritance of *noir* and *neo-noir* films as it used formulaic conventions of both genres, *Miami Vice* was a cultural phenomenon in its own right. Journalist T.D. Allman notes that “*Miami Vice* was a reflection of what was happening<sup>55</sup>” at the time. With its groundbreaking visual style, its original use of pop music it transformed, with other shows like *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981-1987), the conventions of the network and cable broadcast crime series. Moreover, the show’s impact was such that it contributed to the renovation and renewal of the city and, as architect Bernardo Fort-Brescia remarks: “[i]t was [all thanks to] the power of television<sup>56</sup>”.

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## NOTES

1. Steven Sanders, *Miami Vice*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 2010, p. 1.
2. Brandon Tartikoff, president of NBC, on *Miami Vice*.
3. The term was coined in 1946 by French critic Nino Frank. The genre was influenced by numerous cinematic antecedents such as the German Expressionist films of the 1930s, and the so-called "street films" of the 1920s. 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 roof tops appear more grittily realistic and forbidding than the real thing", Nicholas Christopher, *Somewhere in the Night. Film Noir and the American City*, New York & London, The Free Press, 1997, p. 14.
4. While Foster Hirsch underlines the difficulty in defining the *neo-noir* genre as such, I shall follow his approach, that is: "to focus on films that continue the themes and the look formulated in classic noir; branch off into fertile or misguided new terrain; or, most typically, combine traditional and nouveau patterns with varying success", Foster Hirsch, *Detours and Lost Highways. A Map of Neo-Noir*, New York, Limelight Editions, 1999, p. 13.
5. David Buxton, *From The Avengers To Miami Vice. Form and ideology in television series*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1990, p. 120.
6. Julia Kristeva works under the assumption that the urban space can be understood and analyzed as a text.
7. James Lyons, *Miami Vice*, Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, p. 3.
8. Jonathan Rayner remarks that the slow-motion sections "occur to accentuate moments of subjective stress, isolation and heightened perception". They are "a recognizable trademark of Mann's films". Jonathan Rayner, *The Cinema of Michael Mann: Vice and Vindication*, London & New York, Wallflower Press Book, 2013, p. 33.
9. Steven Sanders, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
11. James Lyons, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
12. The riots, which took place in May 1980 and were the first major riots in the nation since the 1960s, had been ignited by the acquittal of five white police officers who were accused of having beaten a black motorist to death. "After three days of looting, 18 people were dead and property damage totalled \$100 million". Trish Jane Shutz and Rob MacGregor, *The Making of Miami Vice*, New York, Ballantine Books, 1986, p. 10
13. In the teaser of the episode entitled "The Maze" (S1E17), Sonny tells fellow detective Tim Duryea: "Look at this neighbourhood. Six months ago, it was a war zone".

14. John-Paul Trutnau, *Miami Vice A One-Show? The Construction and Deconstruction of a Patriarchal Image in the Reagan Era: Reading the Audio-Visual Poetics of Miami Vice*, Victoria, Trafford, 2005, p. 86. As James Lyons notes “FBI statistics suggested that Miami had become the most crime-ridden city in the nation”, James Lyons, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
15. Steven Sanders, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
16. This television series was initiated by Michael Mann with Aaron Spelling Productions.
17. Michael Winner’s neo-noir film *Death Wish* (1974) illustrates the public’s perception of increasing crime rates within the major American cities during the 1970s.
18. David Buxton, *op. cit.*, p. 129.
19. Steven Sanders, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
20. Trish Jane Shutz and Rob MacGregor, *op. cit.*, p. 14. A point effectively made by Corky, Sonny (Crockett) Burnett’s middleman in the opening scene of the pilot: “Malibu. Too much, my man! I mean, the whole geo-cultural concept of it all, man. I mean, farmers. Farmers in Bogota. Bogota to Miami to L.A.”.
21. Trish Jane Shutz and Rob MacGregor, *op. cit.*, p. 87.
22. The production crew even repainted parts of South Beach to maintain the strictures of the palettes. James Lyons, *op. cit.*, p. 48.
23. Trish Jane Shutz and Rob MacGregor, *op. cit.*, p. 90.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
25. Brown, with the exception of the Metro Dade Police officers’ uniforms, was not used in the show’s first two seasons. See Trish Jane Shutz and Rob MacGregor, *op. cit.*, p. 50.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
28. Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick, *City on the Edge: The Transformation of Miami*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, University of California Press, 1993, p. xiv.
29. The opening credits can be viewed at the following address: <https://youtu.be/dEjXPY9jOx8>. The closing credits can be seen at the following address: <https://youtu.be/k9hCWF-nQXg>. It is to be noted that, contrary to the opening credits, the closing credits vary from one episode to another during the first two seasons. Consulted 25 March 2019.
30. The presence of members of the police force at the Cinco de Mayo parade does not give any obvious indication as to the show’s nature.
31. Nicholas Christopher observes: “The city has always been the locus for the worlds of fashion, style, art, commerce, entertainment, and information”, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
32. The opening credits of the above mentioned shows can be viewed at the following addresses: *The Streets of San Francisco* ( <https://youtu.be/fnjMbS1dRp0>), *Kojak* ( <https://youtu.be/HY2reJ9ktRo>), and *Vega\$* (<https://youtu.be/LTZISCHexU>). Consulted 25 March 2019.
33. In “Nobody Lives Forever” (S1E20), Sonny’s girlfriend Brenda, a local architect, discusses the renovation of Miami with Tubbs: “I mean, we’re not as big as Architectonics but... we got a lot of new buidings and restorations and... I like the renovations that they’re doing on the Art Deco in South Miami”. Architectonics is an obvious reference to Arquitectonica, the international architecture and urban planning corporation headquartered in Miami.
34. Steven Sanders, *op. cit.*, p. 22.
35. In “Nobody Lives Forever” (S1E20), Tubbs tells Brenda, Sonny’s girlfriend, that he would like her to discover “the real Miami” with him as opposed to the “fantasy” world in which she lives.
36. The building is renowned for its glass façade and primary colour scheme, as well as the gap forming a “sky court” half-way up the building with its five-storey cutout and its red spiral staircase. The walls around the opening, which offer a view on the building’s interior, are painted in bright yellow.
37. The theme had been already addressed in “Heart of Darkness” (S1E03) when Zwitek and Zito are preparing for a new sting operation with the help of Metro Dade policeman Lester Kosko.

Kosko is the “resident electronics expert”. We can see him set up surveillance material on a shoestring budget. Both the scene and character of Kosko allude to the character of Nosh in a similar scene in *Sharky’s Machine* (1981). The scene may also be read as an allusion to new forms of social control with the growing use of bugs, wiretaps and microphones.

38. *Miami Vice* was, according to David Buxton, the “first series to make use of neurophysiological research on the viewing process”, David Buxton, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

39. I am thinking here of Frank Capra’s film, *A Hole in the Head* (1959), and the frothing romantic and idyllic vision of Miami it imprints on the viewers.

40. Gary T. Marx, *Undercover. Police Surveillance in America*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, University of California Press, 1988, p. 12.

41. Robert Arnett observes that “[b]uildings or structures often form threshold of transition spaces”, p. 51. Robert Arnett, “The American City as Non-Place: Architecture and Narrative in the Crime Films of Michael Mann”, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 27 (2010), p. 44-53.

42. My translation from French: “un malaise spécifique”, in Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton, *Panorama du film noir américain, 1941-1953*, Paris, Flammarion, Collection Champs, 1988, p. 24.

43. The way in which Mann films the red-light district echoes the odyssey of Jake Van Dorn (George C. Scott), a father searching for his vanished daughter through the sleazy porn subculture world of Los Angeles in Paul Schrader’s film *Hardcore* (1979).

44. Some twenty years later in *Collateral* (2004), Mann further explored the multiple possibilities of using nocturnal settings. *Collateral* (2004) and *Miami Vice* (2006) take place “entirely within non-places”. Robert Arnett notes that in Mann’s recent films the architectural representations “reflect the growing sameness of [Marc] Augé’s supermodernity,” which depicts “the loss of identity in the American city”, Robert Arnett, *op. cit.*, p. 48 and p. 51. See also Marc Augé, *Non-Lieux. Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1992.

45. In “The Home Invaders” (S1E19), the bourgeois homes are brutally invaded by a gang whose *modus operandi* rests mainly on violence, brutality, and terrorizing their victims. This episode clearly pictures the city as an unsafe place at night.

46. David Johansen was a member of the seminal proto-punk band the New York Dolls. See also Orrin N. C. Wang “*Miami Vice* Sex and Drugs and Rock & Roll in the TV Market”, *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, No. 33, Feb. 1988, p. 10-19.

47. See Revelation 17-18.

48. James Lyons, *op. cit.*, p. 40-41.

49. Foster Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen. Film Noir*, Philadelphia, Da Capo Press, 1981, p. 10.

50. David Buxton, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

51. My translation from French: “[f]rustrée et criminelle, mi-dévoreuse, mi-dévorée, désinvoltée et traquée, elle tombe victime de ses propres pièges” in Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton, *op. cit.*, p. 20. In “Definitely Miami” (S2E12), Callie Basset (Arielle Dombasle), a beautiful blonde, seduces Crockett and tries to set him up with her murderous husband Charlie. Callie, who epitomizes the spider woman, seduces shady men under the pretense of being protected from her violent husband whereupon the latter murders them and steals their money.

52. The building was located at 615 SW 2nd Avenue across the river from downtown Miami. It was a historically designated piece of Art Deco architecture. It was built in 1942 by the Miami Shipbuilding Corporation (later called Miami Shipyards Corp).

53. David Buxton, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

54. Allan Siegel, “After the sixties: Changing Paradigms in the Representation of Urban Space” in *Screening the City*, eds. Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice, London-New York, Verso, 2003, p. 137-159, p. 137.



55. Andres Viglucci, “The Vice Effect: 30 years after the show that changed Miami”, *Miami Herald*, 28 September 2014, consulted 25 March 2019 at: <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/miami-dade/article2266518.html>.

56. *Ibid.* Since 2018, there have been talks about what appears to be an upcoming project to resuscitate the show, which is to be produced by Vin Diesel for the NBC network. Since the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic, there has been no further news concerning the project, leaving fans waiting in expectation. The show will be a reboot of the original series. A series of teasers have been released by fans on YouTube. Interestingly, they mainly focus on the diurnal and nocturnal cityscape of Miami underscoring how essential the city is to the show. The teasers can be viewed at the following addresses: <https://youtu.be/loqPZRjBl0w> and [https://youtu.be/k8Axcfi\\_X9s](https://youtu.be/k8Axcfi_X9s). Consulted 31 August 2021.

## ABSTRACTS

Amid intense inter-network rivalry and the proliferation of cable, pay television and a nascent and competitive video industry, the major American Networks in the 1980s were faced with major challenges if they wished to continue attracting audiences and profits as they had during the 1970s. *Miami Vice*, which ran for five seasons on NBC between 1984 and 1989, was probably one of the most influential and innovative episodic series of the decade. Following Julia Kristeva’s assumption that urban space can be understood and analysed as a text, the present paper will therefore examine the role of the city of Miami as the show’s main character, before deciphering the possible readings of the diurnal and nocturnal cityscape in relation to the influence of noir and neo-noir films, which are traditionally associated with a city’s “mean streets”. Consequently, the present study will attempt to demonstrate how the show offers a vision of the post-modern city during the Reagan years, while pinpointing the crucial influence the series had on the networks’ future primetime episodic crime series as well as – more surprisingly – its impact on the city’s urban renovation.

Confrontés à une concurrence féroce entre eux (NBC, CBS et ABC), ainsi qu’à la prolifération du câble, à la télévision payante et à la jeune et dynamique industrie des cassettes vidéos, les grands *networks* américains durent, à l’aube des années 1980, se réinventer afin de continuer à attirer le public et faire des profits comme ils l’avaient fait au cours de la décennie précédente. Dans ce contexte, *Miami Vice* (*Deux flics à Miami*) fut diffusée pendant cinq saisons (1984-1989) sur NBC. Elle a probablement été l’une des séries les plus innovantes des années 1980. À l’instar de l’hypothèse de Julia Kristeva selon laquelle l’espace urbain peut être appréhendé et analysé comme un texte, notre présente étude examine le rôle de la ville de Miami comme personnage principal de la série puis envisage les lectures possibles de l’espace urbain diurne et nocturne en lien avec le cinéma noir et néo-noir traditionnellement associés aux quartiers mal fâchés de la ville. Nous tentons enfin de montrer de quelle manière la série offre un aperçu de la ville post-moderne sous la présidence Reagan et de suivre l’influence majeure qu’elle a eue sur les séries télévisées policières qui suivront ainsi que – ce qui est plus surprenant pour une série télévisée – sur la rénovation urbaine de Miami.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** Deux flics à Miami, criminalité, film néo-noir, film noir, surveillance

**Keywords:** Miami Vice, crime, neo noir, film noir, Miami, surveillance

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