

## English Text below

***Collateral*** (US, 2004; regia: Michael Mann, production designer: David Wasco, art director: Daniel T. Dorrance, fotografia: Don Beebe e Paul Cameron, montaggio: Jim Miller e Paul Rubell, interpreti: Tom Cruise, Jamie Foxx, Jada Pinket Smith, Mark Ruffalo)

Cosa ha spinto un cineasta come Michael Mann a portare con tanta assiduità sul piccolo e grande schermo delle storie di uomini e donne che vivono/si muovono nelle metropoli? Non è stata solo una semplice questione di gusto e di stile. Nel mettere in scena storie di criminalità, dolore e disperazione, nel mostrare figure di spietati rapinatori e di integri poliziotti, Mann ha espresso (in quarant'anni di attività sui set cinetelevisivi) una sua filosofia di vita: l'uomo è inscindibile dalle città, è un "pezzo" di esse. E dalle città muove, prende vita una forma di destino – (in)evitabile – per i singoli. Ecco perché, nella maggior parte dei suoi lungometraggi per il cinema (a partire da *Thief/Strade violente*, fino ad arrivare allo straordinario *Collateral*), il rapporto uomo-città ha rivestito un ruolo di rilievo. Michael Mann non è solo un grande cineasta-architetto, è riuscito – attraverso una visione quasi antropologica – a dare vita a una personalissima riflessione cinematografica sui modi in cui il destino degli uomini è legato inesorabilmente alla metropoli in cui vivono. È proprio la rappresentazione della città, con i suoi personaggi i cui destini si incrociano, che fa di *Collateral* il capostipite, il soggetto originario di una nuova generazione di *thriller metropolitani*: quelli del XXI secolo.

*Collateral*, inoltre, porta il suo contributo alla rilettura del carattere "esteso" di Los Angeles, aggiornandone definizione e prospettiva. Alla dilatazione indifferenziata e vaga del territorio urbano, Mann sostituisce una sua specifica, precisa conoscenza della metropoli. L'ingranaggio viario del film elabora una sofisticata segnaletica di quello che era ancora, nel canone cinematografico a cui Mann fa riferimento, un territorio selvaggio da attraversare e (ri)scoprire, pista di esplosivi inseguimenti nonché documento del disfacimento etico e morale della città - tutte annotazioni che aderivano bene al progetto di William Friedkin nel suo film del 1985 *To Live and Die in L. A.* (Vivere e morire a Los Angeles). Ora, invece, la città sembra non serbare più alcun mistero, la conoscenza si è fatta così dettagliata e familiare che il tassista-protagonista può dichiarare in anticipo ai propri clienti i tempi di percorrenza e prevedere senza alcun ausilio di mappe il tragitto più breve. La precisione della conoscenza del paesaggio suggerisce la possibilità di ritrovare un ordine dell'ambiente urbano "disteso". Mann fa, inoltre, dell'orizzontalità diffusa di Los Angeles una dimensione sospesa, aerea.

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The exploration of the lived experience of the city through cinematic constructions is one of the many possible approaches to the study of film and architecture. Storytelling is a significant key

in understanding aspects of architecture and the city. The possibility of narrative within film activating unspoken narratives of architecture and the city provides exciting opportunities for understandings the city in terms of our relationship to it through our senses and, the material and immaterial aspects of experience. To that effect you need an 'architect-filmmaker' such as Michael Mann.

Like the best film noirs, *Collateral* is a film about the city. Max and Vincent's journey through down town Los Angeles seems like the perfect excuse for Mann to revisit his favourite architectural locations, many of which he had first photographed in *Heat*, and to use them as a backdrop that is not simply subordinate to the narrative, but aesthetically enriching and intellectually alive. Mann's loose crime trilogy of *Thief*, *Heat* and *Collateral* has become a striking visual map of contemporary American architecture, immortalising the magnetic and disjointed metropolis through an equal appreciation of love and contempt for the surrounding urban landscape.

Mann uses his stars to reveal the urban landscape. Tom Cruise's introduction into the narrative proper (in the role of hired killer Vincent) occurs when he offers Jamie Foxx's skilled taxi driver Max a substantial amount of money to drive him around Los Angeles all night before dropping him off at the airport the following morning. However, once Vincent's vocation is made clear, and thus the danger in which Max finds himself, this inborn endpoint serves to contribute to the dramatic tension of the narrative to the extent that the audience, calling upon their previous viewing experiences, expects something to happen (to either Max, Vincent, or both) by the time of Vincent's scheduled departure. This pre-established structure likewise is manifest in the details of Vincent's job: he has five hits to carry out before leaving the city the next morning. Hence, Mann borrows his structure in this respect from Budd Boetticher's *Seven Men from Now* (1956) where the killing of seven men – like the five in *Collateral* – will in effect draw the narrative to a close. However, Mann complicates the formula by making his killer not a wronged man seeking vengeance as in the Boetticher film, but a hitman, who professes his own moral imperviousness to the job that he is doing.

Just before sunset, *Collateral* begins in earnest when Max picks up a beautiful district attorney named Annie (Jada Pickett-Smith), who needs to be taken to her Downtown Los Angeles office. With the bet on he best route to get to Downtown, soul music commences on the soundtrack as the camera moves out of the confines of the taxi to depict the car from a distant overhead vantage as it breezes over an LA freeway. After another exchange, in which Max cleverly deciphers that Annie is a lawyer, the film cuts to a travelling shot of the glowing Downtown skyline at night. Subsequently, Mann cuts to a perpendicular overhead of the Los Angeles grid – a view that he returns to repeatedly over the course of the next few minutes, as he does also with various vantages of the LA skyline.

Significantly, it is to the "New Downtown" sector of Los Angeles that Mann returns again and again throughout the course of the remainder of the picture. (As a point of reference, the area that Mann shoots was once known as Bunker Hill before being cleared at the height of 1960s urban renewal projects which razed many of the perceived less desirable sections of many American cities; this older neighbourhood, coincidentally, was featured prominently in Thom Anderson's epic survey of the representation of Los Angeles on film, *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, 2003, as of course was its levelling.) The financial centre of America's second largest city,

Downtown Los Angeles is an orgy of post-1960s glass and steel that attends faithfully to the cleanliness of Modernist and vernacular postmodern architectural traditions. Mann, however, does not simply use the depopulated core of New Downtown as a backdrop for his crime thriller, but indeed builds his narrative around this urban planning project, selecting one space after another that allows him to shoot the space. First, of course, there is the fact that much of the narrative takes place in a taxi, which allows for prolonged character interactions in a confined space that at the same time opens onto an exterior world. This world is, from early on in the narrative, an exclusively nocturnal one filled with glowing automobile lights, often glimpsed out of focus behind Foxx's and Cruise's characters, and most spectacularly, the lights emanating from Los Angeles' sea of skyscrapers. Indeed, in scene after scene, Mann selects locations that allows his camera crew to shoot this collection of glass and steel structures at night: the first hit is investigated by the LAPD in an alley that overlooks Downtown, whereas the second hit occurs in an apartment with glorious views of the nocturnal cityscape. Parenthetically, this is not the Los Angeles that most movie and television viewers readily ascribe to Los Angeles' most well-heeled residents; as a pure signpost of wealth and cultural prominence, the Hollywood area, Bel-Air, and of course Beverly Hills serve this function.

Most spectacular of all, however, is the final hit which leads Vincent and Max to one of the very skyscrapers figuring so prominently throughout the course of the narrative. With its floor to ceiling glass walls, this climatic set piece at once allows for Max's participation in the climactic fifth hit – from a point outside as the tension mounts – while proving itself to be a self-justifying exercise in the shooting of Los Angeles' glowing Downtown core. Indeed, the whole of Mann's work should be thought of in exactly these terms – as a film as much about the filming of this type of landscape (ultimately Downtown Los Angeles is an exceedingly anonymous area; but Mann has chosen not to include Los Angeles well-known architectural avant-garde, in the filming of *Collateral*) as it is about the subject matter of its narrative, which is to say a single, 30-something taxi driver who becomes an unwilling participant in a number of hits carried out by an amoral contract killer.

*Collateral* is a film that capitalises on the pluralism of modern American society – both racially and culturally. However, it is not just in the details that Mann belies a liberal worldview, but moreover in the philosophy espoused by the Vincent character. Rationalising his indifference and the moral relativism that enables him in his line of work, Vincent argues that humankind is just a “speck on one planet”, that we are simply “lost in space”. While it is certainly problematic to read in a character like Vincent the perspective of the film's creator, this feeling for life's absurdity does find its analogy in the film's self-justifying preoccupation with the postmodern dehumanised cityscape depicted at the very height of its visual brilliance (which is to say at night). Moreover, this focus on the city's design, though quite often exceeding the immediate exigencies of the narrative, echoes the film's moral universe. We see this in one moment when Vincent pulls Max up from the ground after a scuffle, revealing a striking vista of Downtown behind; or in the many moments when Mann utilises a technique of reverse shooting in the cab, wherein Max is presented in the right hand portion of the frame, frontally, with scores of lights out-of-focus to the left, while Vincent in the back right seat is presented on the left side with this same field of nocturnal light and colour to his right. Indeed, both the value system expressed by Vincent in particular as well as the architecture featured so prominently

throughout the film represent instantiations of postmodernism. As such, the utilisation of the nocturnal urban landscape in *Collateral* is not simply a self-justifying preoccupation of its creator, though it is this, but is also an extension of the postmodern universe that defines the film's rhetoric.

Yet, even if the film is postmodern in its formulation of a moral system, it remains a fundamentally romantic work in a way that, say, Quentin Tarantino's profoundly postmodern *Kill Bills* (2003–4) do not.

Speaking of the film's concluding passage, it should be remembered that it occurs in part in one of the skyscrapers so central to Mann's rhetoric. Subsequently the drama shifts to Los Angeles' relatively newly constructed rail system, providing one final space from which Mann can depict the beauty of this postmodern urban landscape. That Mann does not confine the action to the underground segments of the transportation system but instead moves above ground demonstrates that his aesthetic predilection is in fact a formative force in the construction of his narrative. However, there is another related reason to Mann's choice at this juncture: an organic justification for ending the narrative. With the conflict having concluded, day begins to break on the outskirts of Los Angeles' urban core. Consequently, Mann ends his narrative as if compelled to do so by the sudden inaccessibility of his primary aesthetic preoccupation. Yet that this change informs the film's close belies the degree to which this emphasis was an aesthetic choice – rather it was the very substance of the film. *Collateral*, in the final analysis, is a film *about* the beauty of the postmodern urban landscape as exemplified by Los Angeles' anonymous incarnation, which concurrently figures the moral universe of its characters. In this way, *Collateral* achieves a degree of organic, internal rigour worthy of the title 'masterpiece' – or at least 'minor masterpiece'.