

Robert B. Pippin

Fatalism in American Film Noir: Some Cinematic Philosophy.

Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press 2012.

x + 135 pages

\$24.95 (cloth ISBN 978–081393189–0)

The philosophical content of film noir has been mined by a couple of anthologies and some scattered articles, but none have gone as deeply as Pippin's book, even though it is along only one vein, these films' treatment of fate and fatalism. His brief book has three central chapters, each concerned primarily with a single film noir, which are bookended by an introduction and a conclusion, both important to the argument of the book. The films examined in the chapters are each representative of the genre: *Out of the Past*, *The Lady from Shanghai*, and *Scarlet Street*. They all receive thorough plot summaries in their respective chapters. There is also discussion of some other noir films, especially *Detour* and *Double Indemnity*.

The lengthy introduction begins with discussion of the characteristics of film noir. These include stylistic elements such as urban settings, low-key lighting, extreme camera angles, and complicated—sometimes impossible to follow—plots. There are also typical thematic elements such as greed, lust, crime, corruption, pessimism about the “American Dream,” the tediousness and banality of middle-class life, and most important to Pippin's study, fatalism. Most of the rest of the introduction is devoted to providing the philosophical background for an understanding of fate and fatalism. This is presented rather broadly, although effectively; Pippin is mostly interested in describing a once widely held view of agency that finds no place within the noir world.

The view of agency that is undermined by film noir's fatalism is called by Pippin in the introduction the “reflective model” (15); it is treated in the conclusion more succinctly and a little differently; there he describes it as “the Western humanist inheritance” (98). It holds that there are actions with corresponding agents and that these actions require explanations that are distinct from those that can be offered for all other kinds of events, e.g., naturally occurring ones. The conditions for action include that 1) the agent knows what he or she is doing and why; 2) the agent is able to deliberate over and be motivated by reasons for acting; and 3) the agent has the capacity to direct events in accordance with this deliberation (98). This view of agency stretches at least as far back as Aristotle; Christianity and its philosophical successors, such as Cartesian views about the mental, have sustained it; but since the 20th century it has been subjected to its most vigorous challenges. As Pippin puts it, this view has “become less and less robustly credible, less widely shared” and it has “lost some of its grip or authority” (99).

Pippin reveals through his examination of the representative noirs mentioned above how almost none of the central characters in noir act in ways that are consistent with the reflective model of agency. They are less like agents, and more like passive objects manipulated by forces outside their control. In Jacques Tourneur's *Out of the Past* (1947), the tranquil life of Jeff Bailey (Robert Mitchum) is interrupted by a visitor from the past, a past that he hoped he lost by dropping his former name, Markham, settling into the life of a gas station owner in a small town, and pursuing the affections of the local beauty, Ann (Virginia Huston). He is compelled to re-

enter this past life in order to fulfill some obligations to a gangster, Whit Sterling (Kirk Douglas), which reignites his romance with the gangster's girlfriend, Kathie Moffett (Jane Greer), a romance that caused the troubles from which he was attempting to escape. Pippin points out that the events in the film—beginning with the appearance of the gangster's heavy in its first scenes—happen so quickly and unexpectedly that deliberation is impossible (the second condition for agency). The agents—principally Jeff Bailey/Markham—are compelled to be improvisers (this invites some comparisons—not pursued by Pippin—with other post-war art forms, like abstract expressionism and beat literature); they must act quickly, without pause to consider what they really want, let alone how to achieve it (40). This prevents them from fulfilling also the first condition of agency, the agent knowing why and what he or she is doing. The speed and novelty of the events they encounter preclude the self-knowledge required for agency, making what they do in response less their own actions and more the unreflective reactions characteristic of other organisms or mere things (so, they cannot satisfy the final condition of agency). The fatalism this entails is reinforced by the common noir techniques of voice-over and flashback, which film noir scholars have commonly taken to “emphasize the sense of fatalism and powerlessness” (38).

These techniques are used in Orson Welles's *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948), but there the entire events of the movie are presented in retrospect, whereas in *Out of the Past* only the part concerning Jeff Bailey's mysterious past are rendered this way. They have the further effect of exposing the narrator—Michael O'Hara (Orson Welles)—to be unreliable, according to Pippin's perceptive interpretation. O'Hara tells the story of his entrapment by various others in their opaque, nefarious schemes. Pippin points out how we cannot trust his post facto explanation of his entrapment; in particular, his sense of its inevitability is a case of self-deception. His status as a diminished agent can be attributed, at least in part, to his own sense of himself as one. Pippin notices the same in the other films he discusses. They portray fatalism as a “temptation” (96). In Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944), the two protagonists might be correct that they are on a ride “straight down the line” which they cannot “get off,” as some of the most famous lines of the film put it, but they use this in a self-serving, self-exculpatory way (96). What results in these films is a “paradoxical dual emphasis” on both fate and the temptation to invoke it in order to escape responsibility. Pippin derives from this the lesson that our “modern fate” presents us with the twin dangers of trusting too much in our ability to control our destinies and surrendering too easily to the perceived determined nature of our lives (97).

The famous funhouse mirror sequence at the conclusion of *The Lady from Shanghai* reveals another important aspect of the diminished agency of film noir characters. Acting requires understanding others' intentions, especially for the collective actions that are an unavoidable part of our social lives. The duplicated images of Michael O'Hara's antagonists in the mirrors symbolize the difficulty of discerning the motivations and intentions of others (71). This theme is repeated in Fritz Lang's *Scarlet Street* (1945). The bank teller and amateur painter Christopher Cross (Edward G. Robinson) is deceived by a much younger woman, Kitty March (Joan Bennett), into believing that she loves him and that this love offers an escape from his meaningless life, which includes a loveless marriage and a boring job. But her deception leads him to steal, eventually murder, and—as a result—to an even more oppressive life than before.

These are only some central samples from Pippin's rich, deep discussions of the fatalistic theme in these films. They illustrate how film—as well as other narrative art forms, as Pippin points out (102)—offer more material for philosophical reflection than a basic thought-experiment. Films provide “intimations of . . . a totality” (99), “a form of life as a whole” (102), through which the implications of a philosophical view can be more fully discerned. Film noir lets us observe the practical side to the abandonment of the reflective model of agency.

So, why does film noir endorse fatalism? Is this a philosophical conclusion or a sociological observation? Pippin provides part of an answer through a “(very) preliminary suggestion” (100) that the issue of human agency is not entirely a philosophical issue; it is also a practical one. Being an agent is not a matter of “being a unique sort of entity” (101), for example, one that is somehow immune to the constraints or influence of physical laws; it is “more like a variable social status instituted and sustained by the relevant social attitudes shared in a community at time” (101). Film noir is “testimony” (99) to a change in our attitudes about agency that is due either to “changing sociohistorical conditions or new findings in science” (101). So, the fatalism theme in these films is not the explicit philosophical or sociological observation of their makers; rather, these films, like other artworks, are—following Hegel—“a distinct kind of communal or shared self-knowledge” (23). However, Pippin does not tell us why we should trust the testimony of film noir and not, for example, Westerns (about which Pippin wrote another book: *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth* [Yale, 2010]), which, as he discusses, present a very different picture of human agency.

This book is written for a general scholarly audience. It would appeal mostly to film studies scholars and philosophers of film. It does not advance the philosophical discussion of agency very much (except for the very provocative but “preliminary suggestion” about the meaning of *agency*). Philosophers interested in this and related topics might still find this book and these films useful. While Pippin is not very convincing (or perhaps I should say, definitive) about the sociohistorical revelations of film noir, he does demonstrate the ability of these films to present a vivid and practical picture of fatalism.

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