Philosophical Film: Trapped by Oneself in Jacques Tourneur's *Out of the Past*[1]

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> The past is never dead. It isn't even past.
> —William Faulkner

I

The belated genre classification, "film noir," is a contested one, much more so than "Western" or "musical."[2] However, there is wide agreement that there were many stylistic conventions common to the new treatment of crime dramas prominent in the 1940s: grim urban settings, often very cramped interiors, predominantly night time scenes, and so-called "low key" lighting and unusual camera angles.[3]

But there were also important thematic elements in common.Two are especially interesting. First, noirs were almost always about crime, usually murder, often cold-blooded, well-thought-out murder. Even more surprisingly, the larger social context for such deeds, the historical American world in which they take place, was itself just as bleak, amoral, and ugly as the individual deeds and the characters themselves. Secondly, and perhaps most distinctively, many films challenged, in sometimes startling ways, many of our most familiar assumptions about psychological explanation. In ways that seemed both mysterious and credible, characters who had been righteous, stable, and paragons of responsibility all their adult lives were seamlessly and quite believably transformed in a few seconds into reckless, dangerous, and even murderous types, all suggesting that anyone, in the right (or wrong) circumstances, was capable of almost anything, and that one's own sincere avowals of basic principles could be ludicrously self-deceived.[4]

This last theme—that a virtuous character can be as much a matter of moral luck (of having avoided by mere chance the particular temptation that would reveal the fragility of one's principles) as an individual accomplishment—is connected with an even larger philosophical issue:

how we explain in general what people do as opposed to what simply happens to them. There is a commonsense understanding of this distinction, one that comes down to us from Aristotle's reflections on the voluntary and that is especially an inheritance of the Christian and Christian-humanist traditions, with the heightened importance in this tradition of individual responsibility for deeds done (in some versions the *absolute* responsibility of singular individuals as centers of agency). Action is action when what I am doing is subject to some kind of deliberative control by a subject, when the deed is somehow *inwardly directed*. The key feature is a commitment to the idea that some conscious inner resolve results in bodily movements, where "results" could mean causes, or is expressed in, or is actualized in; there are many theories. And there are many views about the status of the mental state or act that we want to say is the effective factor in our doing something. Some want to say it must be an act of absolute spontaneity, an uncaused cause, or an act "of free will." Others insist only on a unique sort of causation, a psychological, causal relation between the states of desire and belief in an agent and bodily movement. In all the accounts the emphasis is on some sort of ex ante deliberation about what to do, where what is finally done is a result of some sort of a conclusion to such deliberation about possible futures.

A current, intuitively plausible philosophical idea does not make so much of the causation and free will issues, and notes instead that the distinct feature of actions as events is that they require a distinct sort of explanation, distinct from that appropriate for natural events.[5] Actions have a distinct logical form, one could say; they are purposive doings, undertaken "for the sake of something"; they are reflective and, as it is said, "intentional under some description" (if you asked someone what she was doing and why, she could tell you); and to some degree that form was rational. That is, the answer you get when you ask that "why" question is a reason: what the agent takes to justify the action, or at least that action rather than any other, and their having such reasons was what motivated them to undertake the actions they did (where that need only mean: what they would produce if you asked them why). So it is a philosophical impossibility for the answer to any such "why" question about an action to be "no reason at all; I just did it"; as much an impossibility as saying about a fire that broke out: there was no cause; it just happened.[6] In both this and the former account, practical self-knowledge, deliberation, and an overall reflective grasp of what one is about are all crucial, so let us group them both under the reflective model of agency.

Almost nobody significant in noirs behaves in a way that easily fits such a reflective model of action and agency. For one thing, in some cases

none of the principals have any clear idea at all why they are doing what they are doing. They often think they do, but there is evidence in the films that what they might manage to avow about their motives bears little relation to what they actually do. (They're not generally hypocrites; they just can't come up with a plausible or stable act description, or have no clear grasp of their motives, or both.) Or in other cases characters know that what they are undertaking is profoundly ill-advised and they can admit to themselves and others that there are no good reasons to do what they are doing and many very good reasons not to act as they propose. Yet they act ill advisedly anyway.[7]

Or these characters express themselves, sometimes sincerely and sometimes self-deceptively, in ways that are difficult to fit into the conventional model. They seem to say that the question of what they have reason to do, why they are doing what they are doing, has become irrelevant to what will happen; that they are trapped by some situation, or by some social necessity or by their own past or even by some obsessive love, to such an extent that any reflectively established relation to their own deeds is simply beside the point.[8] With remarkable frequency, they even appeal explicitly to the ancient idea of fate.[9] Characters deliberating and initiating various deeds come to look like pathetic figures frantically pulling various wires and pushing various buttons not connected to some moving machine they are riding, on a course completely indifferent to anything such characters pretend to be able to do.[10] If we extend the image we could say that sometimes the machine looks to be on a preprogrammed course of some sort, unalterable no matter what we do, set by human nature, our fallen nature, social forces, or whatever. Sometimes the machine just seems to be careening about randomly, subject to a vast number of variables no one can manage or control. Fate as blind chance, in other words.

This is all rather strange because we would normally assume that this concept of fate or destiny is relevant only on the assumption of certain religious views, as is especially clear in the context of ancient Greek epics and tragedies. The gods will determine outcomes in the end, no matter what human beings plan, intend, or do. In that context, the expectation that *we* will be able to determine the future, not the gods, is hubristic and naïve at the same time.

It would be an easy solution to all of this to argue that sometimes people are so "overwhelmed" by passion or need or anger or despair that they cease to be agents at all; something emotional happens to them as powerful as the effect of a drug or a brain trauma and they are no longer "running the show" in any effective sense. But this would be far too facile a way to describe what happens to noir antiheroes. None of these can be said "temporarily" to *lose* their capacity to act, as if agency had a kind of

on/off switch. (As we shall see, many films indulge the hypothesis that femmes fatales can cast a "spell" that robs men of their agency, but as we shall also see, such a hypothesis is almost never presented without also revealing why several characters, especially the men involved, have a great stake in indulging in such a fantasy.) However enraged or smitten or jealous or confused, the men and women do act, often long-term, with a good deal of planning and forethought, even though what they do does not seem fully explicable on the reflective model.[11]

So what is so interesting about many film noirs is that the characters in them can be said to bear a certain sort of burden. They have to make some sense of things under what appear to be rapidly changing shared assumptions of how we hold each other to account, what it means to give up some measure of confidence in one's self-knowledge, in the relevance of ex ante deliberation. They feel the pressure of the declining credibility of what might be said to be a whole form of life with a certain picture of individual, reflective agency at its core.[12] (On the Hegelian assumptions I am ultimately interested in, this amounts to a radical claim: that what it is *to be* an agent has begun to shift as well.)

II

Raising these questions this way clearly assumes a commitment to two large issues, both book-length topics in themselves. First, the formulation just presented suggests that there is something like a distinctly "philosophical" approach to an artwork, especially a written or filmed narrative. What *is* such a philosophical approach, and why might that be important? And secondly, what is the relation between our attempt to understand what persons do, and what it is to "follow," make sense out of, a visual representation of a series of events performed by fictional characters in a distinct aesthetic medium? The questions are linked (the philosophical questions, posed to the film, assume that there is some relation between one sort of explanation and another) and I'll state the connection as I see it and then return to the issues in dealing with the details of the film in question below.

On the first issue: we know, or at least there seems to be wide agreement about, what a general psychoanalytic or Lacanian approach to a film would involve, and what a structuralist or semiotic or feminist or neo-Marxist or deconstructionist treatment would look like, but there is no consensus about a "philosophical approach." In recent literature we certainly have some inspiring models: Bernard Williams on the Greek epic and tragic poets; Stanley Cavell's widely and rightly admired es-

says on Shakespeare and Samuel Beckett and Hollywood films; Vincent Descombes' book on Marcel Proust. And we have some examples from the philosophical tradition itself, starting with Plato on (and against) Homer, Hegel on Sophocles or Denis Diderot, Friedrich Nietzsche on the ancient tragedians, Martin Heidegger on Friedrich Hölderlin. But it would be a gross simplification to assume that these approaches share enough to be considered a common method.

I want to claim that Hegel's approach is the most relevant to the issues sketched in the first section above. Hegel famously held that artworks should be understood as attempts at a distinct kind of communal or shared self-knowledge, indispensable as a necessary "moment" in any full self-understanding. According to his account, such a project of coming to a shared form of self-consciousness is a historically long-term and complicated struggle in which the "externalization," as he often put it, of our self-understanding at a time in artworks, in the sensible and emotional modality of art, is as essential to that goal as religion and philosophy, and the aesthetic form of self-knowledge, while cognitive, is one that uniquely engages our affective and imaginative lives, again in ways indispensable to such self-understanding.[13]

One reason such an "externalization" is indispensable is because we often think we understand much, much better than we do the normative notions "closest to us" in everyday life, and the thinness of that understanding can have consequences for the sustainability and vitality of the social practices subject to such norms. "Loyalty," "moralism," "self-righteousness," "freedom," "self-deceit," "honor," "justice," "betrayal," "selfishness," and so many related notions are what have come to be called "thick" concepts, the meaning of which is very hard to identify in classical Socratic definitions. A certain kind of sustained attentiveness to the "use" of such notions at a time in a linguistic community is required both to understand and to assess them. Without that, we literally don't know what we are talking about, and, even worse, think we do. We need to rely on imaginations infinitely more subtle and capacious than our own to make any progress on understanding such notions.

And I will assume with Hegel that the central issue to be raised here, the meaning of agency, of being the subject of one's life, is not properly understood as a timeless metaphysical issue, that the line between agents and impaired agents and nonagents is one that communities draw in all sorts of different ways over various periods, and that it is better understood as an assigned social status, the reality of which depends on the successful establishment of this mutual recognitive status.[14] If this is so, then agency is something like one of those "thick" concepts, a norm of sorts, the conceptual content of which we can only understand in its

variegated and complex uses for a community at a time. Films, and film noirs in this treatment, could then be important as a means for getting some handle on such uses and on the implications of a particular sort of use at a given time.

This is as controversial a claim as it sounds. From the point of view of traditional philosophy, it looks to have everything backwards. We need to know whether human beings actually possess a capacity or not, before we begin acting towards one another as if we did or didn't. How could we assign someone a status without such a question having been answered? In this context I want to show something more limited than a full answer to this challenge: that the lived world inhabited by noir participants puts a great deal of pressure on the conventional, modern account of agency, that that pressure is *credible*, and that it arises naturally on an attentive viewing of the film.

But as noted, this approach presumes a certain kind of answer to the second question. When we attribute an agentive status to a person, presume that we ought to hold each other to account in a certain way and not some other way, we do so under assumptions like those sketched in the first section above. Why should we assume that in our viewing the visual object on the screen these assumptions are also in play? Those images in light are certainly not persons, and the representational regime in which they appear is a product of a screenwriter's text, interpreted in a certain way by a director, shaped in a way by studio politics and economics, greatly influenced by the set designer, the lighting expert, and so forth. Moreover, we know very little about the mental life (or much of the life at all) of screen characters whom we nevertheless (and somewhat mysteriously) come to care a great deal about for a short space of time. And if we limit the questions we entertain to those about the screen characters as if they were persons, focus on questions of individual moral psychology, how things must seem for the character, we might very well miss important nonsubjective determinants of behavior. (All of this is not to mention that many think that entertaining the notion that *persons* are persons, subjects, authors of their lives in any significant sense, is, "by now," naïve in the extreme.)

There are indeed various ways one might "mistake" screen characters for persons, the most egregious of which are those dedicated soap opera viewers who write letters to television characters, giving advice or complaining about what they've done. And some directors set out to "depsychologize" characters, *prevent* psychological explanation, the point of which is lost if we "repsychologize" them. (Jean-Luc Godard's films are perhaps the most famous example of this.) And it would be a mistake to treat characters in the stories of Edgar Allan Poe or the novels

of Franz Kafka in the same way we would treat characters in Anthony Trollope or Charles Dickens.

But while screen images are not persons, and film narration is *sui generis*, there cannot be two *completely* distinct modalities of such sensemaking for actions—one for ordinary life and another governed by an incommensurable movie or dramatic or diegetic or aesthetic logic; at least, not for realist Hollywood narrative film. Motion pictures of characters, whatever else they are, are still representative of an imagined individual's life and action. So at bottom there has to be a great overlap with action explanations in ordinary life and in our attempts to "follow a plot." This is especially true when the film director presents characters acting in ways that demand some considerable *effort* to try to understand what is happening and why, when characters act in ways that seem initially baffling or where motivations are opaque in some way.[15] Understanding, within the narrow limits on information set by the director, what some represented character is trying to do and why is simply unavoidable and fundamental in understanding realist Hollywood narratives. It is fundamental because no other "effect" can be relevant if we take ourselves to be watching patches of color, light, shadow, and shifting shapes rapidly go by (which of course no one does), or if we move immediately to the psychological or "meta" question of why we are moved to feel this way or that. For this latter question to get any grip we have to know *what* might be moving us, and that "what" has to include what we take characters to be doing or trying to do and why we think they are. In just this limited, minimalist sense of "understanding the plot of the movie," many noirs open up onto questions of action, agency, and action explanation that are extraordinarily complex.[16]

III

In the opening scene of Jacques Tourneur's masterpiece, his 1947 *Out of the Past* (thought by many to be the paradigmatic film noir), a well-dressed man in a convertible drives into a gas station in a very small town and announces that he is looking for the owner, Jeff Bailey (played by Robert Mitchum), who, it turns out, is off fishing on his lunch hour with the "good girl" character, the blonde and wholesome Ann (played by Virginia Huston). We learn quickly that Ann had been the long-time sweetheart of a local game warden, Jim (played by Richard Webb), and that Jeff's arrival has created a great deal of unease about the stranger in their midst, but we learn this in a way that goes out of its way to emphasize unusually abstract relations among "seeing," "hearing," and

the truth. (In a conversation at the lunch counter, the nosy waitress, in teasing Jim about the amount of time "his girl" is spending with Jeff, says she only "says what she sees," and Jeff asks if she is sure that she doesn't just "see what she hears.") The boy tending the gas station is a deaf mute (and we learn quickly that Jeff alone in the town can understand sign language, can hear by seeing, in other words, instead of what we will learn to suspect people in the town do, see only what they hear). In these opening scenes we are impressed by how quickly the kid comes to understand, by merely *seeing*, that Joe, the gangster, is dangerous and so is on his guard right away. All it takes is the stranger's reaction to a police car passing by, and the completely revealing, arrogant way he tries to get the kid's attention or demand information by flicking a match at him (See Fig. 1 and 2).

We learn that a gangster and gambler, Whit Sterling, who has employed Jeff before, wants Jeff to come visit him and it is a "request" that Jeff apparently cannot refuse. It is immediately clear that Jeff had been in effect hiding out in the small town of Bridgeport and by mere chance (a force that will play a great role in all the major events) has been discovered.[17] On the way to Whit's mansion near Lake Tahoe, Jeff, who has changed clothes and thereby also rather abruptly, in one step, changed from peaceable rural gas station operator to private eye, complete with trench coat and fedora, decides to tell Ann, who is riding along, about his past, something he had clearly hoped was over and that he could hide from. The flashback/voice-over section of the film begins and we go back in time.

Jeff and his partner in a New York detective agency had been hired three years earlier by Whit to find one Kathie Moffet (played by Jane Greer, in a fantastic performance), his girlfriend, who shot him four times and, he says, stole forty-thousand dollars from him. Jeff tracks her down to Acapulco, falls for her, and thinks she has fallen for him. They meet in the archetypal noir scene in which the hero first sees the femme fatale. The earth moves; he turns into a quivering lap dog; or so goes a standard story (See Fig. 3).

Femme fatale entrances in noirs often suggest the extreme view of a magical spell or mysterious erotic power that can render the male forever afterwards a mere dupe, a passive victim of such power, a non-agent. The femme fatale theme is far and away the most written about issue in film noir, and there is much more to say about it, but at least these entrances do demonstrate how utterly a life can be altered in a single moment. Even doing nothing about what one feels still alters everything, because doing nothing now becomes an event that then shadows everything else one does. One *cannot* now act in complete indifference to how one's

Fig. 1.

Fig. 2.

Fig. 3.

fate has been altered, where "cannot" in this one of its many fatalistic senses means that such indifference would make no sense in one's life; one could not recognize oneself in such a picture of indifference and so cannot act indifferently.

It is also important, in this noir and many others (like *The Lady from Shanghai*) that Jeff and Kathie are shown to be gamblers; they "bond" at a private gambling casino in town, gamble that they can escape and elude Whit (himself a gambler), and reveal themselves later because they cannot, apparently, "stay away" from gambling and so go to the horse races. That is one way of dealing with the perceived uncontrollability of fate—placing bets and living with the consequences—and for that reason gambling assumes a kind of existential importance in many noirs.[18] That is, one accepts that one does not really control the future, but one rather bets on what will happen and tries to get some small "edge," especially counting on the fact that those in the square world do naïvely believe they can affect types of outcomes, manipulating that faith to their own advantage. *The Gambler* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky is probably the most well-known treatment of the issue as a figure for modernity in general, but gamblers and the gambling mentality pop up frequently in noirs.

Jeff and Kathie sneak back together to San Francisco where they hide out, eventually daring to go to that public place that seems suited to

them, the race track, and are accidentally (chance again) discovered by Jeff's former partner, Jack Fisher. Fisher tracks them down to their remote cabin in the mountains and demands the forty-thousand dollars he believes Kathie has stolen (it is clear that Jeff does not believe she stole it, because that is what she has told him). Jack insults Kathie; Jeff hits him and they begin to fight. As Jeff seems to gain the upper hand, suddenly a shot rings out. Kathie has killed Jack, insisting that it was necessary because she knew that Jeff would never have done it. As Jeff lights a cigarette and tries to figure out what to do, Kathie bolts and disappears. Jeff discovers in her purse a bank book for forty thousand dollars (See Fig. 4).

We exit the flashback and return to the present. Jeff kisses Ann goodbye and heads into Whit's mansion, where he is shocked to discover that after all this, *there is Kathie* at the mansion; she had returned to Whit sometime after fleeing the cabin.[19] Whit proposes one more job for Jeff, something to clear the books, free Jeff from the debt he owes Whit for having double-crossed him. Jeff had traveled to Tahoe, we are to suppose, only because he thought Whit might know something about the death of Fisher. He says as much to Ann. When, after the initial conversation, Whit does not bring Fisher up, Jeff turns him down flat and prepares to leave, clearly relieved. But when he has seen Kathie, he knows he's trapped. He can never be sure that Kathie did not or will not tell Whit either the truth or the lie that he, Jeff, killed Fisher. So he is, as Whit says, "back in the fold" (See Fig. 5).[20]

There is then a scene where Kathie tries to explain herself, and Jeff responds. It is in a way an unusually harsh response, and it catapults the film into a new and much more sophisticated psychological register. Kathie pleads (as she did at the breakfast table) that she "had no choice" but to return to Whit, and Jeff contemptuously accuses her of being like a leaf blown from one gutter to the next (See Fig. 6). But it emerges that this response has its own ironies because *Jeff is just as guilty as Kathie of the things she is saying about herself.* He too "can't help" being back in Whit's control, not to mention, later, Kathie's control, as yet again the theme of agency and qualifications on agency is foregrounded. (Kathie is in this scene lying about virtually everything. What is interesting is that Jeff is in essence also lying to himself about this break with Kathie, as we discover later.)

So Jeff feels he has to help in Whit's plan; that, again ironically given his disdain for this reason when Kathie uses it, he "has no choice." Whit's tax man in San Francisco, Leonard Eels, who has helped him cheat the IRS, is now blackmailing Whit and Whit has concocted a plan, in cahoots with Eels's secretary Meta Carson (played by Rhonda Fleming, see Fig. 7),

Fig. 4.

Fig. 5.

Fig. 6.

Fig. 7.

for Jeff to sneak into Eels's office and steal the incriminating documents.[21] We learn later that this is all a frame-up, that the real plan is to murder Eels and pin it on Jeff, as a means of both getting the documents back and getting revenge on Jeff for double-crossing Whit. In a very complex set of plot developments, Jeff discovers the frame-up and foils it. After Eels has been murdered, Jeff, hiding in Meta's apartment, overhears Kathie and knows she is part of the frame-up. But the scene in which he figures it all out has the same self-contradictory structure as the earlier scene at Lake Tahoe when Kathie tried to justify herself. We notice again (a) how bitter is Jeff's condemnation of Kathie for "changing sides" so quickly, and (b) *how quickly Jeff himself changes sides* at the end of the scene. (He thinks she is acting in a way completely inconsistent with any way he would act; then he acts that way. See Fig. 8.) The lighting and staging of this scene are also quite beautiful—very lush black and whites.[22] And Kathie expresses at the end the naïve ideal that undergirds the whole movie: starting over, escaping the past, "as if nothing had happened."

Jeff does recover the documents and proposes a once-and-for-all escape deal to Whit, who accepts. Jeff returns briefly to Bridgeport to say goodbye to Ann. (Interestingly, he lies to Ann, saying that when he saw Kathie again he "felt nothing," when we have just seen him "melt" again, admitting that he doesn't hate Kathie and kissing in a way that hardly seems strategic. See Fig. 9.)[23] In the meantime the ruthless Kathie, after her declaration of love to Jeff, sends Joe to kill Jeff—a plan that is foiled by the kid, who hooks Joe's arm with a fishing line and pulls him off a cliff to his death.

Jeff returns to Tahoe to find that Kathie has also killed Whit and that she has undergone a remarkable, even flabbergasting visual transformation, returning us to the theme of what one "sees" and how dependent it is on what one has heard, knows, or feels. After we have just seen her at her most glamorous and beautiful and alluring, she has almost *completely desexualized herself*,[24] as if to emphasize how she now holds all the *real* power cards, is "running the show," a hyperagent, does not need to depend on sexual allure (on the passive power of the beloved), and is glad of it (See Fig. 10).

Apparently, after seeing Whit dead, and with Kathie as close to honesty as is possible for her, Jeff decides to pretend to go along with her back to Mexico on the plane Whit had ordered from Reno. But while Kathie is upstairs, Jeff calls the police and turns them in, alerts them about where they'll be driving, so there is a road block waiting for them. Kathie realizes what Jeff has done and shoots Jeff before the police open fire (See Fig. 11). I suppose the polite way to say it is that Kathie shot Jeff "in the groin area," but it is as emasculating a shot as one can imagine.[25]

Fig. 8.

Fig. 9.

Fig. 10.

Fig. 11.

IV

The scene then shifts again to Bridgeport for a kind of full circle closure. Ann must know, in order to escape *her own past*, if Jeff was killed while planning to run away with Kathie, if he had been untrue to her, or if he had broken with Kathie and was with her only under duress.[26] As noted, it is also not clear what Jeff had expected would happen, whether he thought they would be arrested or whether it was a suicide plan all along. I think it is clear that *we* at least know that Jeff was *not* planning to run away, and we sense that if Ann believed that (the truth), she would still have to "carry a torch" for Jeff and would be just as trapped by her past as he was. Remarkably, the kid seems to sense this too, so we get the final scene, in which he pretends to know the truth (just, it appears, by knowing Jeff better than Ann does), lies to Ann, tells her they *were* running off, and salutes the Jeff Bailey sign, indicating he deceives Ann because this is what Jeff would have wanted, and implying he somehow did know that Jeff was *not* running away with Kathie. (He "saw" this without having had to "hear" it.) Such deception is one way to be able to escape the shadows cast by the past.[27] I think we are pulled towards some sympathy for what the kid does, but there is a great deal of irony in the scene. The kid clearly *does* know Jeff very well: *he does the same thing Jeff did* ("I felt nothing"), that is, he lies to Ann, and therewith manipulates her for the sake of Jeff's memory, not for her own sake (hence the "salute" of obedience *to Jeff*). Of course, given her doubts even in the face of Jeff's protestations, she may be asking to be lied to, as the kid may understand. But he is nevertheless manipulating Ann, even if also "freeing her" from the past (See Fig. 12 and 13).

V

Jeff's account to Ann of his first encounter with Whit and Kathie introduces us to a very common noir narrative technique, the flashback with voice-over narration. That technique has a special meaning in *Out of the Past*, since it connects up immediately with the theme stressed in the opening scenes. For in films like this, we are both *shown* events and we are *told* about them; or we both see what happens and we hear not only characters explaining what they are doing inside the narrative but also an independent narrative line, and we have already been warned in the opening scenes about only "seeing what we hear"; warned, that is, about the variability of what we can be seen, given what we hear or what we believe about what we hear. We are alerted to the difference

Fig. 12.

Fig. 13.

between what actually happened and the distinct point of view of the participant narrator, alerted to the way the narration and the action can "come apart" as it were, if we are sufficiently attentive. (Another way of stating the problem: often the flashback "telling" is not so much a perspective *on* what is shown [although it is partly that], but another element *of* what is being *shown*. The narration is another event and so it and the events narrated then *both* require interpreting. This is a story Jeff is telling *Ann*, not the viewer or an audience in general, and so it is not surprising that it is a story of a femme fatale of extraordinary powers and ruthless brutality. What's a poor guy like Jeff to do?)

But the technique also functions in the way it does in many other noirs and that function is linked to the noir perspective on agency and its many complications. Many commentators note that such a technique helps emphasize the sense of fatalism and powerlessness. We watch the events unfold as if they were happening in front of us, even though it is already established how they will turn out, and we have a sense of watching *an already determined series* simply play out. And the narrator, whose voice often has a weary, ironic tone, seems to take the same line: this is the way it happened,[28] I can't change anything now, but I also could not have changed anything then. One can sometimes get the sense that just as the narrator and we are watching an already determined narrative unfold, the narrator feels he was in much the same position as the events actually unfolded, more a spectator than a participant.

More generally, the flashback or the "flashback position" can be said to be required in a philosophical sense, given the way we are shown the action unfolding; required if we or the characters are to make any sense of what happened. That is, contrary to the reflective model, there is very little opportunity for ex ante deliberation in the scenes we see, and little evidence that responses are the expressions of already deliberated about and resolved general maxims of action. In the simplest sense, events come at characters much too fast and too confusingly to allow such reflection or reliance on the already reflected. Characters act, often under duress and very quickly and in confusing situations, with little knowledge of what is going on or of other people's motives or understandings, and only *then* (if then) can they reflect on what they did and what it means for the future. The flashback is a kind of archetypal representation of such unavoidably post facto "deliberation." Rather than being able to rely on ex ante formulated policies, characters can be said to express what turn out to be their actual commitments and aversions in action, and must then retrospectively interpret what that meant; in a sense they determine thereby who they are. It is no use to insist that, even so, characters can be said always to act "in character," out of habituated

dispositions that are themselves the results of many prior actions that do reflect some deliberated conclusions. We see far too many characters who act in the heat and confusion of the moment directly counter to what their "characters" might have led us (and them) to expect. This belatedness will look like a denial of agency only if we beg the question from the outset and simply assume that agency requires ex ante deliberation and bodily movements caused by the relevant psychological states or the firm possession of reasons for acting. This "flashback" position is not the site of mere confabulation; it is often the only position from which agency can be "recovered." (It is an echo of such retrospective situations as Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus*, where Oedipus utters what I would half-seriously nominate as an early noir line, "I suffered those deeds more than I acted them.")[29]

In many other cases the situations are simply far too novel to fit into any ingrained habits of responsiveness and action. The novelty and extremity of the situations alone make the reflective model look like too great an idealization. Especially when we consider examples from noirs, the claim by the German social theorist Hans Joas is quite compelling: that we require another model of action besides the strategic and value-oriented reflective one. We need what Joas calls a "creative" model of action, not one modeled after reflective deliberation. And noir participants are indeed perhaps best thought of as creatively improvising on the fly, thrusting themselves into the future without benefit of much reliance on reflection and the past in general, much as a painter or a poet will improvise a figure or a line and try to determine afterwards if the improvisation was appropriate.[30] Many of the situations Jeff faces require such immediate, creative improvisation: what to do after Kathie suddenly shoots his partner, after he discovers Kathie back at Whit's mansion, after he discovers Whit shot dead, none of which is he "reflectively" prepared for or has much, if any, time to consider before he must act.

But the "belatedness" of reflection in the flashback is also relevant to the most important issue in any account of events that are distinctly actions—the nature of the self-relation involved in intentional deeds, especially what and how I could be said to know about myself when I know what I am about. Now of course, we know very little psychologically about the screen characters we see, know nothing about their childhoods, parents, what they are like in many other contexts, and so forth. As noted earlier, they are not real persons, but complex aesthetic objects whose presentation to us is tightly and very narrowly controlled. (And all of this is complicated by the fact that they are also recognizable movie stars playing roles determined by the Hollywood studio system.)

But in many noirs, the director often goes out of his way to emphasize that in the dimensions relevant to the action we are watching, there is not something missing that we or they *could* know, but in the strictest sense, there is nothing there to know "yet," at least ex ante.[31]

That is, I have suggested that in many noir examples, although there are examples of irrationality, characters often are not deceiving themselves or acting against what they know are their best interests (although this is not uncommon and is puzzling in itself), but they are often in some way profoundly opaque to themselves or act without being able to register and respond to what is happening to them. We can say that they are not deceiving themselves because they are not in any dialogue with themselves at all. This is partly because, given the speed and uniqueness of the situation, they cannot be, or cannot yet be. The dizzying speed of events in noirs is something only film can convey with such urgency, thanks to extraordinary directorial control over editing, the length of takes, what information to reveal when, and so forth. And it often dramatically places us in the same position as the films' characters, leading to all the typical sotto voce patter one hears at noir showings: "Who the hell is that?" "Wait! I thought she was dead." "Are we supposed to know whether he knows?" And it is partly because any ex ante formulation of a self-attributed intention has to be provisional, could be a self-inflated or self-demeaning characterization, the truth of which can be known only "in the deed," only after they (and we) see what they actually do. And finally, it is partly because the possibility of self-knowledge in these contexts is inextricably linked with the possibility of knowledge of others' intentions and motives, the right interpretation of past actions and so forth, and none of these characters can master so much information and so it's next to impossible for them to know "how they feel" about something or what they want.

This means that the meaning of what we did (something that involves the right ascription of motives post facto) is greatly subject to "back shadowing." Bernard Williams gives a great example of this, unintentionally a kind of noir example.[32] A married man is having an affair and is racked with uncertainty and guilt. He breaks it off with his mistress, yet he keeps creating ways of running into her and often they resume their relationship before he breaks it off again. He tells himself he knows what he believes both to be right and good for him—his married life—and he berates himself for his weakness of will. This continues until finally the man comes to believe that he belongs with his mistress, divorces his wife, and lives a happy life with his new wife. Now, and only now, what then looked like weakness looks instead like the expression of what he really valued most, thought best. He turned out to have been wrong

about himself, about what he wanted most, and not weak willed at all; in fact he turned out to have been "willing to take risks to his security for the sake of his love."

Another example would be the great neo-noir, *Chinatown*. Robert Towne's screenplay (for which he won the Oscar) had a more upbeat ending than the actual film. In Towne's version, Jake and Evelyn get Evelyn's daughter back and the vile Noah Cross is defeated. On the set, Roman Polanski changed everything at the last minute and *that* changed *everything* we had just seen. In Polanski's infinitely superior ending, Cross wins and gets his granddaughter, who is also his daughter, back. The last line of the film, the famous "Forget it, Jake. It's Chinatown" thus backshadows everything we have seen. A picture of collectively effective agency (what it would have been in Towne's upbeat ending) becomes a picture of naïve, futile, and pathetic gestures at a fate that was all along unalterable. Not for nothing is the greatest and most philosophically sophisticated modernist novel a flashback, paradigmatically embodying this backshadowing determination of meaning as the only way what we do can be understood—Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

VI

So when Jeff is riding with Ann in the car on the way to Whit's, he is clearly not only narrating what happened; he is also struggling to get some perspective on what it was he actually did and what that implies about what he must do, where that means a struggle to reconstruct what his motives and intentions might have been, something he and we will finally only be able to see in the ultimately belated situation, when it is all "over" and he is dead. (Film noirs are often justly criticized for their astonishingly explicit misogyny, but what is sometimes ignored is that the picture of the femme fatale that we see is often from the point of view of a male with a huge stake in *mystifying* the power of such a woman, and so avoiding some, perhaps all, responsibility. This is as true of the narration in *The Lady from Shanghai*, *Double Indemnity*, and *Detour* as it is here.) How should we summarize what he comes up with?

In the first place, of course, motives are not always so hard to determine. Sometimes, especially at the beginning, it is all straightforward. Whit beckons Jeff and offers a fat fee for a missing person job. Five thousand dollars is a huge sum; understandably, he takes the assignment. He finds Kathie in a small Mexican town, is smitten by her in her great entrance, gets involved, but still heads to the telegraph office to turn her in to Whit. It's closed, *merely by chance*, and so he doesn't,

can't wire Whit. He sees her again and, we have to say, is then "played" by her, as the supposed object of seduction seduces him. They escape together and a great deal of everything else that happens seems in some way "determined" by this one act. It is "*the past*" that they cannot escape. Then Kathie shoots his partner and Jeff is in the position again of having to respond in the improvisatory way we discussed before. He decides to bury the partner and hide out in Bridgeport. Then Joe finds him and he must respond again, this time to Whit's second offer. We've already seen how ambiguous that decision is. After this, things get more and more confusing, and we start having as much trouble as Jeff figuring out what he is doing and why. Jeff knows he is being framed for the murder of Eels and succeeds in upsetting Whit's plans, trying to get Whit's tax documents for himself so he can, he obviously hopes, blackmail himself into the clear, free of the Eels frame-up and any suspicion of murdering Jack Fisher. At this point, he seems to think of himself as working only against *Whit's* frame but—in another "then I saw her" moment—he meets Kathie again *thick in the midst of Whit's frame-up men* and he knows she is actively involved. This scene is a perfect illustration of Jeff being pulled one way (keeping faith with Kathie) and then another way (betraying her), all remarkably within seconds of each other. In the midst of Whit's henchmen at a nightclub owned by Whit, this flipflop occurs very quickly. Jeff knew the files were in Eels's safe because *Kathie* told him, but after a knowing look exchanged between them, he lies for her and says he had Meta followed. *Immediately* thereafter though, when one of the henchmen wants to know who told him about Kathie's affidavit (saying that he, Jeff, killed Fisher, signed by Kathie), it seems that the very act of explaining the document pulls him in another direction. He lets the question hang without answering, and when Kathie, understandably counting on his continued loyalty, says "Did Meta tell you?" this time he says no, and so allows the only possible inference—that Kathie told him—all with a quiet "Sorry" to Kathie (and no explanation for this sudden shift. See Fig.14).

What should we say about this? We could say that Jeff is being "inconsistent" and "irrational," and this might lead us to conclude that he is not "in control" of his emotional life, that he is just being swayed one way or another, barely "acting" at all, impulsively lurching in one direction, then another. But there are all sorts of other possibilities. He could be willing "to protect Kathie" (perhaps because he thinks he needs her for the end game with Whit), but only up to a point. (And he then discovers that point.) And we, and he, find that point when he has to quickly consider whether to protect someone who now fits under the description, "the author of the affidavit that could ruin his life." He might not be being

Fig. 14.

either inconsistent or emotionally driven. Or he might, after calculating that he can and should protect Kathie, have changed his mind, realized that he has nothing to fear since he holds all the important cards, and seized the opportunity to make a point to Kathie, not needing to worry about the consequences for their plan.

But it is also possible that there is no way to attribute any coherent policy or what the Kantians call "maxims" to Jeff. If we think of him as improvising responses on the fly, with temporally quite provisional and rapidly changing takes on what is happening and equally provisional and quite mutable intentions, it might be a while before it is clear, even to him, what his overall commitments to Ann and to Kathie, his fears of Whit and so forth, all mean in this context (what they mean especially in terms of what he ought to do). We tend to think that if this is so, if there is no determinate motive identified, then what happens must be so impulsive as to not count as an action, but I am trying to argue that such an assumption is question begging, simply defining out of existence what Jeff does as "not a doing." This lack of clarity about how he finally feels about Kathie, and so about what he wants and intends, appears to be resolved only when he realizes that Kathie must have sent Joe to kill him, and he then proposes the endgame to Whit: that Kathie take the fall for the Fisher killing. I say "appears to be resolved," because even then, there is all the ambiguity

about the balcony scene with the nunlike Kathie, an ambiguity yet again summed up by a kiss (See Fig. 15).

It seems to me that *even at that point* the kiss is not completely staged or merely strategic on Jeff's part (a lot comes down to how you read the position of his hands), and, in another startling reversal, it appears genuine *on Kathie's part.* He appears to visibly wilt or melt yet again, as if he realizes that Kathie is right. Neither of them *is* any good; they belong together. That is, she is encouraging Jeff to realize something about his fate, that neither of them belongs in the square or straight world, content with the limited room for maneuver as agents that fate allows them. *That* world has its appropriate rules or morality, and neither of them shares that world, and in that sense they will both always be "bad." There is no particular reason Kathie needs to take Jeff with her, and even if there were, she could propose that they leave together as mere self-interest: he'll never be able to explain all these corpses. Her expressions of passion don't seem ulterior and Jeff does not push her away in disgust, as he once did. It is a strange "love scene."

But Jeff *does* act, decisively and in a way that is much more than a mere response. He finally seizes control of "the show" and begins to "run it" for the first time (interestingly enough, anonymously). We don't know what he intends, but the fact that his tip to the police must have been anonymous indicates that he was not "turning himself in," together with Kathie. (There is no: "Hello, it's Jeff Bailey. I'll be on such and such a road with the murderer of Whit Sterling.") I think we are meant to believe that he intends to crash the roadblock and get them both killed (or that he doesn't care either way). It's likely he also has no illusions about what his murderous, ruthless partner will do when cornered. So, finally, what does this last genuine "action" indicate about the strange status of agency and action in the film, the status of some sort of compromised "passive agency" or "weak intentionality"?

The title indicates that part of the fatalism suggested by the film stems simply from the unalterability of the past and the unavoidability of the train of unintended events—a powerful inexorable fate—that one action can occasion forever after. Jeff gets involved with Kathie largely because the telegraph office was closed, and everything else follows in a way they afterwards cannot control and cannot escape . They run off together, so Whit continues to hunt them and hires Jeff's partner. Jack finds them. Kathie suddenly and shockingly shoots him. Jeff and Kathie are then also linked forever after to *this* impetuous action, leading to Whit's ability to set up the dizzyingly complex Eels blackmail frameup scenario. So Jeff is a victim of his own actions, and his own actions are both so multiply and obscurely motivated that they are barely "his own,"

Fig. 15.

but they still remain his, attributable to him. In all these senses he is trapped by himself, by what he does and who he happens to be.

In this context, there is some measure of redemption in the fact that Jeff attempts to seize control of an even larger dimension (the largest) of an inescapable fate—his own death. In the more "existential" noirs (like Rudolph Maté's *D.O.A.*), this picture of suffering a constantly threatening and ultimately triumphant fate—one's constant "dying" and eventual death—frames and figures in a very general way the futility, ultimately, of any pretension to run any show. The all-important beginning and the end of the show have already been written and characters are just marking time until their time is up. But for once, Jeff acts and in the most decisive sense of all; he either decides when he will die or he acts in indifference to his own life. He does not let death (or Kathie, who by this point looks like some specter of death itself) decide.

VII

Let me return a final time to the philosophical implications that arise from considering the drama this way, and so to the issue of how the film might itself be considered a form of philosophical exploration.

The problem I raised for film noirs from the forties—the appearance of an unusually bleak fascination with a fatalistic picture of human existence—might be unusual in classical narrative Hollywood film (where traditional images of agency as a causal power are predominant), but it is certainly not news in philosophy and literary and cultural theory. Under the influences, first, of the so-called "Masters of Suspicion"—Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud—and in our own day under the influence of everything from structuralism and various "antihumanisms" in European philosophy to evolutionary biology and the neurosciences (experimental results, brain imaging, Benjamin Libet's famous experiment, and so forth), many seem to have concluded that in an ever expanding range of cases, it only seems to us that we are "running any show" as conscious agents in any even metaphysically modest sense; it only seems that we could be actually *leading* our lives, deliberating, resolving to do things, and doing them because we have so resolved. On the other hand, in many of these contexts, it also seems simplistic to say that because these general traditional conditions of agency have not been met, or are only minimally met, then to just that extent we must be said to be in the grip of something, some passion or unconscious desire, and that we are not acting at all; something is happening to us.

But the neglected question in such discussions is: if these traditional assumptions about self-knowing, deliberation-guided, causally effective agents are becoming less credible and under increasing pressure, *what difference should it make in how we comport ourselves*? What would it actually be to *acknowledge* "the truth" or take into practical account the uncertainty? It is difficult to imagine what *simply* acknowledging the facts would be, to *give up* all pretensions to agency. Even if the "moving machine" picture is only roughly accurate, it is hard to see how we could simply declare that we are not in charge, the machine is, and simply "wait to see what happens," what the machine ends up doing. For all the familiar attacks on the author or the subject, this issue has barely been explored at all.

What *Out of the Past* and other noirs help one see is how different that issue looks when conceived as a practical, and from the first-person point of view, unavoidable, problem, not a theoretical one; one that calls for practical judgment, not metaphysics. That is, Jeff and other noir heroes and antiheroes must sort out for themselves when exculpatory appeals like "I couldn't help myself," "I had no choice," and "I didn't intend to" are in fact reasonable excuses and when they are self-deceptions, evasions, or even self-serving lies. (And the complexity in many noirs stems from the fact that, while much *does* seem fated and beyond control, appeal to such a fate is often clearly *also* an act of self-deceit or a

willful evasion of a responsibility one clearly bears.) Likewise, when Jeff refuses to accept Kathie's fatalistic characterization that both of them simply *are* "no good," implying that it is useless to fight, and he calls the police, he has not discovered a power that Kathie thought he lacked. He assumes a stance, a practical point of view, that in effect concedes how limited is the room for action allowed him by this point, but which does not assume that he is simply "carried along" by the consequences of his history (his past) or his nature ("no good"). He ends up an agent, however restricted and compromised, in the only way one can be. He acts like one.

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NOTES

1 An earlier version of this article was the first of three lectures on film noir, delivered as the 2010 Page-Barbour Lectures at the University of Virginia, and an expanded version will appear in *Fatalism and American Film Noir: Some Cinematic Philosophy*, forthcoming with University of Virginia Press. I am grateful to Walter Jost and Talbot Brewer for the invitation to deliver the lectures and for their hospitality during my stay. The three lectures were also given at the University of Chicago under the sponsorship of the Karla Scherer Center for the Study of American Culture and I am grateful to Eric Slauter for arranging these highly fruitful conversations. I am especially indebted to a number of people for discussions about the lecture and the film, a number too large to list here, but they know who they are and I hope know how grateful I am.

2 The history of the term is well known. After a long wartime period during which no American movies could be shown in Paris, French critics were astonished at what they saw when the films finally returned in 1945. They especially expressed amazement at what had happened to the American gangster film or crime melodrama or private-eye thriller, and some argued that the movies being produced were qualitatively different, as if a new genre altogether, much darker and stranger than those previously made. In 1946 the journalist Nino Frank compared the films to the *série noire* novels and coined the name "film noir." Eventually Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton published a very influential book in 1955, (*A Panorama of American Film Noir, 1941–1953*, trans. Paul Hammond [San Francisco: City Lights Book, 2002]), and the convention was firmly established: the Americans had been making film noir, even though all during the classic period of the 1940s no one had any idea that they were making such film noir. (As we shall see it is quite appropriate that this would all become clear only afterwards.) For the best background account, see James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1998). By fairly wide agreement, the classic "noirs" were produced between 1941 and either 1955 or 1958, depending on what one counts as the last "true" noir. That is, either Robert Aldrich's highly ironized *Kiss Me Deadly* or Orson Welles's mannerist, self-referential *Touch of Evil* could claim the title of the last "classic noir." The list of what are classified as "neo-noirs" is quite long, testifying to the extraordinary influence of these films.

3 The most important article on the visual motifs is Janey Place and Lowell Peterson, "Some Visual Motifs of Film Noir," in Alain Silver and James Ursini, *Film Noir Reader* (Popmton Plains, NJ: Limelight Editions, 1996), 65–76.

4 I am thinking especially of Fritz Lang's "twin" films, *Woman in the Window* (1944) and *Scarlet Street* (1945), although many other examples could be cited of characters who would never have thought themselves capable of murder but who, when offered the opportunity, start plotting away.

5 The best survey of the contemporary options in action theory is George Wilson's entry on the subject ("Action") in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (George Wilson, "Action," *http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/action/*). The emphasis on uniquely psychological explanation is Donald Davidson's.

6 This is already controversial of course. It is not difficult to think of things we do (pacing up and down, ordering the steak and not the lobster, helping Fred move) that do not fit easily into this model, where it seems easy to say, "I just did it," but I will pass over such issues for the sake of this high-altitude summary.

7 In Tourneur's *Out of the Past*, when Kathie tries to convince Jeff that she has not stolen the money she is accused of stealing, all in the context of deciding whether they should run away together, Jeff interrupts her and short-circuits both the reflection on why and the assessment of risks by saying simply, "Baby, I don't care."

8 The titles of many noirs make the point directly: *Caught*; *Possessed*; *Tension*; *Conflict*; *Framed*; *Detour*; *Pitfall*; *Edge of Doom*; *One Way Street*; *The Reckless Moment*; *The Set-Up*; *Brute Force*; *Desperate*; *The Big Sleep*; *Where the Sidewalk Ends*; *Odds Against Tomorrow*; *Undercurrent*; *Underworld*; *Roadblock*; *The Steel Trap*; and, of course, *D.O.A.*

9 As when the main character in Edgar Ulmer's classic, *Detour* (1945), says simply, "Fate or some mysterious force can put the finger on you or me for no good reason at all."

10 In Edward Dmytryk's *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), for example, Philip Marlowe complains, "I don't know which side anybody is on. I don't even know who's playing." In the apposite words of one noir commentator, "The most striking alteration of Hollywood dramaturgy is that noir characters usually act from inchoate, unknown or pathological motives. Such characters prevent the narrative from being organized according to Aristotelian principles of cause and effect." R. Barton Palmer, *Hollywood's Dark Cinema: The American Film Noir* (New York: Twayne, 1994), 19.

11 In the terms David Pears used, what is distorting judgment need not be "hot," an overwhelming passion of the moment, say, but can be "cold," a complex, continuing motive for self-deceit, say. David Pears, *Motivated Irrationality* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's, 1998), 6–14.

12 I take the extraordinary persistence of these themes in so many films of the forties in the classical noir period (1941–48) to be some evidence that they constitute just thereby a genre, though I will not attempt to argue for that here.

13 I concede that such formulations raise countless questions. What makes such an externalized object aesthetic, an art object? What is distinctive about our reaction to, experience of, such an object? What kind of knowledge is "communal self-knowledge"? What about the place of aesthetic pleasure? Why assume there is such a thing as a "community," what Hegel called "*Geist*"? What about evaluations of quality, greatness? Is that dependent on lucidity of self-knowledge? Hasn't Hegel's narrative teleology been discredited? Why drag him into this? But one never gets anywhere if one tries to go everywhere and I will concentrate only on the films here. For a more extensive discussion of the relation between Hegel's understanding of "the fine arts" and his philosophy see my "What was Abstract Art? (From the Point of View of Hegel)," *Critical Inquiry,* vol. 29, no.1 (2002): 1–25; and "The Absence of Aesthetics in Hegel's Aesthetics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel and Nineteenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. Frederick Beiser (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), 394–418; for a parallel treatment in literature, see *Henry James and Modern Moral Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), and in film, "What is a Western? Politics

and Self-Knowledge in John Ford's The Searchers," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Winter 2009): 223–46.

14 This is not a relativist position because Hegel thinks he can show how we can be said to get better at doing this without that meaning that we are getting closer to getting the matter of fact right.

15 This often happens to us because it is happening to *them*; they cannot figure out what is happening and why, and when we see them at work trying to figure things out we see at work various assumptions central to philosophical accounts of action.

16 David Bordwell has claimed that all of classic Hollywood narrative film depends on a certain philosophical assumption and "psychologically defined individuals who struggle to solve a clear-cut problem or to attain specific goals," that is, individual centers of causal agency reflectively aware of problems to be solved and why they need to be solved; *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 157. As my colleague Miriam Hansen has pointed out to me, this assumption is already satirized in many great comedies, but it is especially put into question in many film noirs.

17 Perhaps a small joke is intended here. Robert Mitchum was born in Bridgeport, Connecticut. (Mitchum's biography's title was thus appropriate. It is a line from this movie. Lee Server, *Robert Mitchum: Baby, I Don't Care* [New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2001]).

18 I am grateful to Tom Gunning for discussions about the importance of gambling in the film.

19 This is one of the holes in the plot. Whit later says that he "took her back" when she begged to be taken in, but we are not given any credible reason why Kathie would return to Whit, or exactly when. I think we are to suppose that the appearance of Fischer spooked her. She realized that Whit would never stop hunting her, so she might as well resign herself to it, begging only that he not kill her in revenge. We have seen her plead in this sense with Jeff, and she is good at it.

20 There is much more to this, to the relation between Jeff and Whit. Many commentators have noticed the homoerotic sparks flying between them, especially on Whit's side. That is playing a role. And Jeff has a kind of Conradean professional code; he believes in doing his job well, and he had "sinned" against the code only once, when he ran away with Kathie. Besides being trapped by the Fischer murder, Jeff does genuinely seem to want to "square" things with Whit; that he owes him and should pay off the debt in trade. Of course, he also knows that Whit will likely kill him if he does not play along.

21 Meta (Rhonda Fleming) is made up to look very much like Kathie II, the Kathie of the Eels plot, with her hair up, and when we see Kathie in the Eels plot, it can be very confusing, especially when Kathie pretends on the phone to *be* Meta. Leighton Grist suggests that Tourneur is creating a kind of mythological identity between dangerous women, "female sexuality" itself, personified everywhere as always "related to death and transgression"; "Out of the Past: aka Build My Gallows High," in *The Movie Book of Film Noir*, ed. Ian Alexander Cameron (London: Studio Vista, 1992), 208. The identity confusion also makes it seem as if the Eels plot is a kind of repetition of Jeff's fate, that he may "always" be subject to such women in such ways, that he escapes "out of the past" only to reenter it symbolically and sexually again.

22 The cinematographer for the film was Nicholas Musuraca, who had previously worked with Tourneur on *Cat People* (1942) and *The Leopard Man* (1943).

23 One might be a bit more charitable here and say that Jeff is confused about his feelings, is mystified by his continuing involvement with Kathie and just doesn't know whom he loves and to what degree. This would then force on us the question of how anyone decides a question like this ("Was there anything? Did you find you loved her still?") and that question would launch us directly into the major issue that keeps coming up in discussing these films: what is it to know your own mind? I have said that I find much

of Moran's "agency" approach attractive (to know one's own mind is to make up one's mind, to avow what one stands for, not to inspect one's inner life and either find something or not). Richard Moran, *Authority and Estrangement* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001), 58–60. Posed in that way, that raises the questions of what sort of reasons one might have for an avowal or its refusal, and what to make of situations (like love) where "reasons" talk seems out of place. That is, it would seem wrong to say that Jeff must deliberate about whether Kathie is "lovable" or merits love (or what he is to feel), as opposed to what reasons there might be for Jeff to think he is just erotically bound to Kathie, or as if reasons could resolve a question like that.

24 Leighton Grist goes so far as to say, in quite an odd but apposite phrase, that "the effect is a vindictive de-sexing." Grist, "Out of the Past," 212.

25 This last scene raises quite a general question about the archetypal function of the femme fatale, as core a feature of noirs as anything and the most written about topic. There are, for example, similar endings in Robert Siodmak's *The File on Thelma Jordan* (Barbara Stanwyck sticks a heated cigarette lighter in her gangster lover's eye, causing a car crash), in Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (with a great twist; Stanwyck shoots first but does not fire again and so allows herself to be shot and killed), in Fritz Lang's *The Big Heat* (Gloria Grahame tosses scalding hot coffee in the face of her lover Lee Marvin, just as he had done to her), in Otto Preminger's *Angel Face*, when Jean Simmons races backwards off a cliff with Mitchum in the car, and in John Cromwell's *Dead Reckoning*, where, again in a speeding car, Lizabeth Scott shoots Humphrey Bogart in about the same spot. I have been suggesting that film noir's narrative structure continually raises questions about the identifiability of reliable act descriptions and the great uncertainty of self-ascribed motives, all in a way that challenges widely held, conventional views about the nature of action and agency. But one might ask at this point, though, about the status of references to male castration fear or phallic imagery or the barely submerged homoerotic bond between Jeff and Whit and so forth that seem to arise naturally in film. The most that can be said in this limited context is that, while appeals to unconscious motivation are often reasonable and are clearly being invoked by directors, that basic model of explanation still assumes many of the conventional views about action motivation, and supplements them with the notion of unconscious (determinate) motivation. I am suggesting that many noirs challenge these assumptions without conceding that the actions in question are therefore not really actions.

26 Palmer even says that the "world of melodrama, we might say, reasserts its control" (*Hollywood's Dark Cinema*, 64). Palmer also discuses in this essay the themes of the everyday and domesticity raised by the "Bridgeport" issue and the relation between these as a kind of ideal and the temporal narrative form in the film. I would go a bit further and say that Jeff's failure to find a way "back to Ann" tells us as much about Ann and Bridgeport as it does about Jeff's rootlessness.

27 The film thus closes back on itself, typical of the cyclical nature of time in noirs. That is, we return to the beginning mise-en-scène, to the gas station, a question about Jeff, and this time a drive *away* from it. See Chris Fujiwara, *Jacques Tourneur: The Cinema of Nightfall* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2001), 147.

28 "Mitchum relates his history with such pathetic relish that it is obvious there is no hope for any future: one can only take pleasure in reliving a doomed past." Paul Schrader, "Notes on Film Noir," in Silver and Ursini, *Film Noir Reader*, 58. Schrader also notes how the tone of the narration creates a sense of "an irretrievable past, a predetermined fate and an all-enveloping hopelessness."

29 As quoted in Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1993), 68.

30 Hans Joas, *The Creativity of Action* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1997).
31 As noted before, there *are* some examples which seem to suggest unconscious motives in the Freudian sense. *Gun Crazy* (Joseph Lewis, 1950) is like this. *Conflict* (Curtis Bernhardt, 1945) is very explicit about this. But these are not typical.
32 Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 45.