

# Agency and Fate in Orson Welles's *The Lady from Shanghai*

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## 1

Motion pictures of actors representing fictional characters doing things engage our responsiveness in manifold ways. Some responses are distinctly aesthetic (in the original sense of sensual) and have to do with credibility, compellingness, excitement, concern, fear, anxiety, identification, and most of all simply with pleasure; perhaps it is a distinctly aesthetic pleasure, perhaps a distinctly cinematic aesthetic pleasure. These are relatively (though not completely) unreflective responses, and so some criterion for sensible and affective success must be observed, or the photographed action aesthetically fails, and there is no pleasure or engaged response. We are bored, repelled, confused.

Another kind of responsiveness has to do with commercial aspects of the industry and the status of movies as commodities. We see (we pay to see) recognizable movie stars usually repeating specific character types in genres so established that our expectations and reactions are predictable, and we seem to enjoy such predictability and repetition.

Some responses are possible only in the medium of film. The speed of the narration and point of view and distance from the actors can be controlled and varied as in no other medium, and audiences originally had to learn—had to be taught—how to follow such narratives and adjust for such points of view.

Some responses are more complexly psychological. We seem to take a distinct sort of interest in being invisibly present at filmed action, especially at filmed moments of great intimacy or violence or terror. Moreover, as the technical powers of movies grow and we are able to represent compellingly almost any sort of world or event, movies seem more and more connected

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with the deepest sorts of human fantasy, and the intense pleasure we take in the experience of such fantasies has begun to dwarf what is possible in all the other arts. Such a pleasure has inspired many sorts of explanations, many of them, understandably, complex psychoanalytic explanations.

But some responses engage our intellectual faculties in a broad sense, especially with respect to what characters *do*, with respect to *actions*. We have to make sense of what characters do, and for classic Hollywood realist narratives we bring to bear on that question the ways we attempt to make sense of our own and others' actions.

There are certainly great gaps between what we do when we try to understand what we and others normally do and what we do in trying to understand moving pictures of actions. Movie characters are not of course real people, and perhaps ultimately these cinematic images make some specific sort of sense to us only within the artificial and varying boundaries set by a medium-specific aesthetic object and in an experience that is quite distinct from ordinary perceptual and emotional experience, an aesthetic experience. Moreover, screen characters are the products of such a dizzying array of factors—the screenplay, the *mise en scène*, the particular requirements of the studio where the movie was made, the director, the actor's performance—that the shape, strains, and tensions in a given character can be multiply overdetermined. But, while screen images are not persons and film narration is *sui generis*, there cannot be two *completely* distinct modalities of such sense making: one for ordinary life and another governed by an incommensurable movie or dramatic or diegetic or aesthetic logic. Motion pictures of characters, whatever else they are, are still representative, doubly representative, actually, since the complex, im-

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puted “author” of the film (which might include all the factors listed above)<sup>1</sup> is representing actors who are (if the director allows it) representing a person’s life and action, all in a way they think will be understood. 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 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, or when it is simply hard to know what is happening, what act description is relevant.<sup>2</sup> I want to talk about a whole genre of such cases shortly. 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 start out watching at the metalevel or if we move immediately to the psychological question of why we are moved to feel this way or that or why the film was a commercial success or failure. For such questions 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 doing them. In just this limited, minimalist sense of understanding the plot of the movie, many film noirs open up onto questions of action, agency, and action explanation that are extraordinarily complex.<sup>3</sup> This all would get more complicated still were we to try then to take full account of the distinct aesthetic medium of film and the uniqueness of the film-

1. I don’t mean to be taking a position on auteur theory as such, only to be indulging the useful fiction of an *imputed* governing intelligence behind the aesthetic decisions. If elements in the film cannot be made to fit an interpretation controlled by such an imputation, then we have to look elsewhere for explanation—to the studio’s interference, for example. But we should exhaust the first possibility before we do so.

2. This often happens to us because it is happening to *them*, the movie characters; 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 any account of action, assumptions that we also have to call on.

3. David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison, Wis., 1985) has summarized the conventional view that all of classic Hollywood narrative film depends on a certain philosophical assumption: “psychologically defined individuals who struggle to solve a clear-cut problem or to attain specific goals” (p. 157), that is, individual centers of causal agency reflectively aware of problems to be solved and why they need to be solved. (“In classical fabula construction, causality is the prime unifying principle” [ibid.].) As my colleague Miriam Hansen has pointed out, this is already challenged and often satirized in many great comedies, but it is especially put into question in many film noirs.

viewing experience, but there is an enormous amount of great philosophical importance going on when we try to explain what I am identifying as the minimum conditions for the intelligibility of filmed action, and that attempt need not prejudge or mislead us about these further issues. They are just distinct questions.

Moreover, we need this overlap at the outset of any discussion because the brilliant achievement of the core group of great noirs is to show how terribly *limited* explanations that focus on the moral psychology of individuals turn out to be, given how little of the future they can actually effect as individuals (the explanation of what happens does not finally lie with what they try to do and why they try to do it, however natural that assumption is to realist narratives), given how unstable, provisional, and often self-deceived are their claims to self-knowledge, and given how little in control they are of their criteria for deliberation, how absurd it is to expect them to be able to step back, as it is said, from their commitments and desires and goals and reflectively deliberate about what they ought to do.<sup>4</sup> We shall have occasion in the film under discussion to see how important the opening overlap expectation is in order to set us up for the disappointment involved in discovering how little attention to the subjective inner life of the characters is relevant to what happens.

4. Candace Vogler identifies what she considers various problems involved in philosophical treatments of literature (and, I presume, film) that treat characters as persons and identifies my treatment of Henry James as having made such a mistake; see Candace Vogler, "The Moral of the Story," *Critical Inquiry* 34 (Autumn 2007): 5–35, and Robert B. Pippin, *Henry James and Modern Moral Life* (New York, 2000). I cannot take up all the subtle issues that Vogler raises, but to clear some space for what I want to do here, I note the following: (1) It is true that in some works of literature "characters" are no more than the mythic ciphers who populate, say, the stories of Edgar Allan Poe. (2) The ethically relevant dimensions of a situation can be objective constraints and distortions that will not show up if we take as decisive only what shows up for the characters. (3) What we know about literary and filmic characters is much different from what we know about people, and it is much more controlled and directed. But (4) aside from a "mistake" like falling in love with a character in a novel or film and writing letters to her, everything concerning a potential confusion depends on the particular nature of the work, and I have tried to say here why some overlap in our understanding of cinematic characters and persons is inevitable in trying to follow the plot of a realist narrative in a studio-system film from the forties. Moreover (5) the contrasts themselves can be distorting or misleading, as if one has to choose between treating characters as persons or treating fictional entities as properties of or instantiations of structure, words, images, social or libidinal forces, and so forth. This seems to me a false duality, but pursuing the issues would obviously require a separate, lengthy discussion. I find myself in agreement with Stanley Cavell's remarks at the beginning of his essay, "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*," *Must We Mean What We Say* (Cambridge, 1976). (All this, even though Henry James, say, is not a model for how the novels of, say, Gustave Flaubert or Robert Musil or Franz Kafka or Samuel Beckett should be read, just as Jacques Tournneur or Orson Welles or John Ford are not models for how to interpret Jean-Luc Godard or Robert Bresson.)

## 2

No group of Hollywood films demands more sustained effort in this regard (figuring out what characters are doing and why) than those that have come to be designated as film noir. As commonly used, the name refers to a group of films, called by some a genre, produced roughly between 1941 and some time around the mid to late fifties. (Many critics date the classic noir period as occurring between 1941 with John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* and either 1955 and the rather bizarre, almost avant-garde noir by Robert Aldrich, *Kiss Me Deadly* or 1958 and the highly stylized, mannerist apotheosis of the noir style with Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil*.) An unusually large number of the directors of these films were European, and some of the most important were very influenced by the German expressionist filmmaking of F. W. Murnau and G. W. Pabst.<sup>5</sup> I mean the likes of Billy Wilder (aka Samuel Wilder), Jacques Tourneur,<sup>6</sup> Fritz Lang, Rudolph Maté, Otto Preminger, Edgar Ulmer, Robert Siodmak, Curtis Bernhardt, William Dieterle, André de Toth, and the largely unclassifiable Alfred Hitchcock, together with some like-minded Americans such as Welles, Henry Hathaway, Nicholas Ray, Jules Dassin, Edward Dmytryk, Joseph Lewis, and a few others.

Even though the genre designation is belated (no one in the forties making these films had ever heard of film noir) and controversial, most everyone agrees that there were many stylistic elements in common in these films (grim urban settings, often very cramped interiors, predominantly nighttime scenes, gloomy, often oneiric sets, low-key lighting, and unusual camera angles).<sup>7</sup> And they were often bleak, even despairing films. The noir representation of bourgeois domestic life—the peaceful, secure, commercial and domestic activity many heroes were so desperately trying to establish in Hollywood Westerns of roughly the same period—was so stultifying and banal that even crime began to look attractive to those trapped in it. (If Westerns were mythic accounts of life before the rule of

5. The link between film noir and German expressionist filmmaking is prominent in the first serious book-length study of the genre, Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton, *A Panorama of American Film Noir, 1941–53*, trans. Paul Hammond (1955; San Francisco, 2002), pp. 24, 41. See also Paul Schrader, “Notes on *Film Noir*” and Charles Higham and Joel Greenberg, “*Noir Cinema*,” in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini (Pompton Plains, N.J., 1996), pp. 55–56, 27–35. This claim of a German influence has certainly been contested, too; see Edward Dimendberg, “Down These Seen Streets a Man Must Go: Siegfried Kracauer, ‘Hollywood’s Terror Films,’ and the Spatiality of Film Noir,” *New German Critique*, no. 89 (Spring–Summer 2003): 115–24.

6. Tourneur could claim dual citizenship. He was born in France, came to the U.S. when he was thirteen, and worked a good deal in both countries.

7. See Janey Place and Lowell Peterson, “Some Visual Motifs of *Film Noir*,” in *Film Noir Reader*, pp. 65–76 for an explanation of the stylistic elements.

law could be established,<sup>8</sup> many noirs gave us a picture of life in a nearly postlegal order.) But there was also a common thematic element. Many of these films not only had “complicated” and hard to follow plots, presented characters’ motivation as opaque and often confusing, and very often raised the specter of fatalism (that, in ways deflating and depressing, a great deal of what we take to happen because of what we do does *not* happen because of what we do, happens independently of what we want to happen and try to bring about), but that in all these respects they thereby also raised deep questions about very widespread assumptions we normally bring to bear on our attempts to render actions intelligible, and they provided some evidence that these assumptions were becoming less credible, were losing their grip in some sense.

What are these commonly held assumptions in the basic form of action explanation? By now the philosophical landscape is dotted with so many positions on the themes of action and agency that it is difficult to get to a sufficiently high altitude to see any commonalities. However, I want to suggest that those who think there are such things as actions and agents requiring logically distinct forms of explanation usually point to many common features, the simplest being that (1) in acting I know what I am about and why I am about it (some stress especially that I know this in a unique way, nonobservationally and noninferentially) and (2) that what I am doing is subject to some kind of deliberative control (I am able to arrive at reasons for acting by deliberation and be motivated by them), and (3) that I, considered as a distinct particular, have the capacity to direct a course of events in line with the results of this deliberation. Call this the Humanist Inheritance, the inheritance of a complex tradition stretching back to Aristotle on the voluntary, massively influenced by Christian requirements for individual responsibility and guilt, and largely influenced by (but not wholly determined by) Cartesian positions on the required metaphysics of mental interiority.<sup>9</sup>

All three of these assumptions presupposed in our inherited notion of agency are placed under great pressure by many noirs. Of course, on the self-knowledge issue, I could easily be said to have practical knowledge of what I am doing in cases of simple, straightforward actions: going to the store for bread, tying my shoes, driving to pick up my son at school, and so on. But noirs, and indeed much literature and film in the modern era, provide ample credible examples that in more compli-

8. See Pippin, *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth: The Importance of Howard Hawks and John Ford for Political Philosophy* (New Haven, Conn., 2010).

9. The Wittgensteinian inheritance is of course explicitly anti-Cartesian.

cated cases (the ones we care most about) we are much less confident that people can provide a clear act description or even a very clear account of motivation. If they do, we often read or see that the act description is hotly contested (you were not doing X, you were in fact doing Y) and that that avowed motivation has little or no connection with what the character actually does. Likewise, we can detect a suspicion that *what* we are able to effect as the result of deliberation is actually of a much, much smaller extent than we optimistically assume when we decide what to buy, whom to marry, whom to vote for, what we are willing to sacrifice for.

In many noirs, characters who take themselves to be deliberating and initiating various deeds come to look somewhat like figures frantically pulling various wires and pushing various buttons that are, unknown to them, not connected (or not as connected) to some moving machine they are riding, on a course completely indifferent to anything such characters pretend to do (or much *more* indifferent than the riders believe). If we extend the image, we could say that sometimes the machine looks on a preprogrammed course of some sort, unalterable no matter what we do, set or programmed by human nature, our fallen nature, our genetic inheritance, social forces, the initial conditions at the Big Bang, the laws of physics, or whatever. Perhaps the machine just seems to be careening about randomly, subject to a vast number of variables no one can manage or control or effectively predict—fate or destiny as blind chance, in other words.

Such a deflation of the scope and power of agents as traditionally understood is not of course limited to American film noir of the forties. In the last hundred and fifty years or so, 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. In some quarters this has become so obvious a truism that noting it counts as banal.

But the question all of this raises is a difficult one and not well addressed by those convinced of the "death of the agent" or "death of the subject" or "death of the author": if these traditional assumptions are exaggerated or too optimistic or less credible and under increasing pressure, *what differ-*

ence 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 giving up all pretensions to agency would be like. Even if the moving-machine picture is only roughly accurate, it is hard to see how we could declare that we are not in charge, the machine is, and simply wait to see what happens, what the machine—our selfish genes, brain chemistry, the forces of production, the unconscious—ends up doing. In any practical sense such a picture is absurd. Moreover, when characters in noirs do invoke something like such considerations (“I couldn’t.” “I had no choice.” “It was my destiny.” “Nothing I could have done would have changed anything.”) as an excuse, we often suspect (and we are often right) self-deceit and a lame attempt to avoid responsibility.

I want to suggest that the problem of *living* under such pressure, with such doubts, is given no more intelligent treatment than in the best of the noirs, and I want to present an example as evidence of such a claim.

### 3

The opening of *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948) is an archetypal noir scene, a classic stunned-by-a-femme-fatale opening, and, as in many other noirs, it is meant to raise the questions just discussed because it suggests some sort of power that robs a man of his free will or initiates an *amour fou*—an obsessional, irrational, all-powerful desire (figs. 1–3). But in the flashback voice-over narration (about which more in a minute) we also have clues everywhere about the untrustworthiness of what is presented. We should also note first that it is also very clever in its staging. We start low, looking up, as does Michael O’Hara (Welles). He ascends to a position at the top of the cab, driving, as if in control now, and then sidles into the spot next to Elsa Bannister (Rita Hayworth), as if climbing into bed. All of these “positions” turn out to be in one way or another false or misleading (except perhaps the first, where he is down, looking up, subject to what he hopes to control), and the spatial shifts introduce right away the most tangled issue in the film; who is running the show, driving whom where?

The film looks to be about the lady from Shanghai, Elsa Bannister (fig. 4). She is indeed at the center of events (like Aristotle’s unmoved mover and many other femmes fatales, she moves by being loved or at least intensely desired), and referring to her with a definite description turns out to be appropriate, even if far from actually definite. She is officially the lady from Shanghai, but that seems completely arbitrary. She tells us that she is originally from Chefoo, and when told that Chefoo is the



FIGURE 1. *The Postman Always Rings Twice*



FIGURE 2. *Double Indemnity*

FIGURE 3. *Vertigo*FIGURE 4. *The Lady From Shanghai*

wickedest city in the world next to Macao she says she worked there, too. She only incidentally mentions that she also worked in Shanghai and that a person needs more than luck to make one's way there. (This

rather blunt association of Elsa with sites of evil doesn't seem to register on Michael.) She has Russian parents, was (is?) a gambler,<sup>10</sup> and, we learn much later, it appears she is guilty of something serious enough that she has been blackmailed into marrying "the world's greatest criminal lawyer."<sup>11</sup> We never learn what this blackmailable deed was.

Our narrator makes clear that he is quite conscious of telling a story. As noted, Michael plans to be a novelist, and he is clearly intensely aware of how what he is narrating seems to an audience, occasionally slipping into flowery "literary" language. What we are hearing as the voice-over appears to be the novel he has written after all these events are over. But what amounts to a kind of preamble to the story is quite confusing and guarded. He says three things in the opening, and all are directly addressed to our central question. If what makes an action an action is responsiveness to that why question, and so the relation between one's mindedness and what happens, then Michael starts us off with three very different and somewhat problematic stabs at an answer to the question, why did I get involved in all this in the first place?

He first says, "When I start out to make a fool of myself, there's very little that can stop me." He can't of course mean he actually *intended* simply to do something foolish, that foolishness was his end or purpose. But he later returns to the image, even more paradoxically calling himself "a deliberate, intentional fool, and that's the worst kind."<sup>12</sup> (When Elsa invites him to crew for her yacht, he not only turns her down he almost violently tears up her card, and his face reveals that he knows to a moral certainty that going with her in the yacht would be incredibly stupid and dangerous. Then he does so.) So he must be ironically stressing *how* foolish it all was (that is, risky) and how he was so aware of that going in, *as if* he started out actually trying to make a fool of himself. But he then says that if he had known where the whole story would end he would have never let it start; he would not have been foolish. Ignorance of the future is the problem. But he *then* immediately contravenes that statement: I would not

10. Gambling and the life of a gambler are one of the most common tropes in noirs and are largely a response to the fatalism theme. If you can't control or direct what happens, the most appropriate form of life is one where you simply bet on what *will* happen, trying to get some small edge in whatever way you can.

11. At the picnic scene later, right before Michael's famous shark speech, Elsa almost tells Michael and us the story. When Arthur Bannister (Everett Sloane) says Michael ought to hear the story of how Michael and Elsa became his wife, she asks, "Do you want me to tell him what you've got on me, Arthur?" clearly alluding to blackmail.

12. He must mean something like "I knew it was foolish but I did it anyway," but his actual formulations are, tellingly, more extreme. This line is from the aquarium scene, where schoolchildren catch them kissing. The third reference to fools is Michael's famous line at the end, "Everybody is somebody's fool."

have begun it at all, he says, had I been in my right mind. But “after I saw her,” he notes that he was rarely in his right mind. So our narrative starts with three exculpations, qualifications on the strength of his agency: (1) I’m habitually and intentionally *foolish*, I don’t do what I know is better for me to do, and I sometimes even *intentionally* do what I know to be foolish in order to be foolish; (2) I was *ignorant* and could not see what was coming; that’s why I acted as I did. And, finally, (3) I was not in my *right mind*. So our story starts out with what appear to be damning and philosophically problematic self-characterizations, all of which in reality already seem self-protective and, suspiciously, to some degree morally exculpatory. (“I was foolish, ignorant, crazy, and so on. I couldn’t help myself.”)

So what *is* Michael’s relation to her, who *is* she really, and *why* will he be drawn into the mess he is about to be drawn into? We learn that he has been recruited to play a role in a frame-up. Elsa and her husband’s law partner, Grisby (Glenn Anders), have hatched a plot to kill the husband, Bannister, and blame it on Michael. Apparently even the event that initially involved picking up Michael was a fake mugging, staged in order to enlist him. But Bannister also knows all this; he has a detective always present, Sid Broom (Ted de Corsia), watching what Elsa does. In some sense, as he himself admits, even Michael seems to know something like this is going on and is aware from the beginning that some sort of game is being played.<sup>13</sup> The husband hatches a counterplot, which ends up getting Michael blamed for Grisby’s murder, which Elsa committed. The husband appears to be at Elsa’s beck and call, going to the seamen’s hiring hall to offer Michael a job, as if doing her bidding, but, unbeknownst to us, he has already started in motion *his* counterplot and is actually pulling most of the strings. In the terms used in the film, the question is always who has what edge over others, and that is extremely hard to figure out, for them and for us. It’s a mess indeed. There are few films of any genre where, first time through, there is more of a question about who is running what show.<sup>14</sup> Michael’s excuses are appropriate because we are about to be

13. Michael begins to suspect that their chance encounter is staged when he discovers that there was a pistol in the purse Elsa threw away during the “assault.” He is obviously not convinced when she says (in an unintentional double entendre) that she “meant” for Michael to find it (the true part of what she says, but of course it was “intended” as part of the frame-up) because she didn’t know how to shoot. This is unconvincing; as Michael says, “you just pull the trigger.” For a while though, he will only suspect that these are all “rich people games,” that she is amusing herself picking up lovers.

14. The idea one sometimes hears—that Welles casually and sloppily rushed through the movie, unconcerned about it except as a way of financing his stage production of *Around the World*—is belied by the care we know he lavished on each scene and how hard he fought with Columbia and Harry Cohn over the changes they were insisting on. See the invaluable documentation in Jean-Pierre Berthomé and François Thomas, *Orson Welles at Work*, trans.

shown a man at once extremely wary (repeatedly and knowingly, almost violently refusing a job on Elsa and her husband's yacht) and stupendously gullible (suddenly changing his mind and later agreeing to be part of a plan that on the face of it makes no sense). But then the plot itself is barely believable (it mirrors the plot *in* the film that Michael is asked to believe) and those who think Welles is parodying what a Hollywood director believes audiences will swallow, or what studio pictures regularly concoct, have a point. Michael has just run into a woman in New York, and he, on his own, by chance, happens to mention reading about a defense attorney who just got someone obviously guilty off, and it turns out to be Arthur Bannister, Elsa's husband. Miraculously, the lawyer's partner, Grisby, *and* the detective, Broom, are *also* there in the garage where Elsa and Michael turn up.

Indeed the entire filmed world that we see is like a film world, like a stage set created and controlled by a director. (When Bannister plans a picnic for Elsa, the result is very much like a major studio production, hundreds of natives in canoes, torch-lit spectacles, and so forth. Bannister as ship's captain is just as flamboyant, extravagant, and theatrical as Welles the director in this rather bizarre hothouse of a film.) Maurice Bessy is right when he remarks that the world of the film "is the sumptuous, hallucinogenic and baroque re-creation of a world in the process of disintegration."<sup>15</sup>

It is onto this stage (that is, settings that are everywhere staged) that our hapless hero wanders, the Irishman Michael O'Hara, who seems capable of both naively mistaking all of it for the "real world" and self-consciously reminding himself that it isn't. We learn that Michael is a political person, a veteran of the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War, an occasional dockside agitator, and an aspiring novelist. In the film, he occasionally comments on the injustice of class inequality and the perversions of rich people. And Grisby continues the political theme, since he appears to be

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Imogen Forster, Roger Leverdier, and Trista Selous (London, 2008), pp. 128–42, esp. p. 140. It is true that much of what Cohn and his editors cut from the film in postproduction makes many of the details very hard to follow, especially such issues as how Elsa managed to kill Grisby. For more on the category under which Welles himself understood the movie (an on-location "thriller") and on its political dimensions, see Gabriel M. Paletz, "Orson Welles: An Auteur of the Thriller," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 4 (Dec. 2006): 217–39.

15. Maurice Bessy, *Orson Welles* (New York, 1971), p. 60. Andrew Sarris considers the film, especially the shattered images at the end, to be "a superb metaphor for the movie career of Orson Welles" (Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929–1968* [New York, 1968], p. 79).



FIGURE 5.

some sort of right-wing nut; he was on a pro-Franco committee during the war) (fig. 5).

One has to say, though, that Michael seems to overestimate the importance of politics in this world. That is, he does this “inside” the narrative, as a character in it—not, interestingly enough, as the narrator, “outside” it. In that role he does not refer to class or wealth or guilt the way the character inside the narrative does but instead almost incessantly to his foolishness and stupidity. The experiences he is narrating seem to have changed him, such that the narrator thinks differently than the narrated Michael. Throughout, he (the narrated Michael) clearly believes that the strangeness and the perversity of what he observes is to be explained by differences in class, that this is what rich people who are unproductive and useless do to amuse themselves, and that it is especially what rich women do—have casual love affairs. He has no idea that there is a dimension of the struggle for mastery and control and power that is even more brutal and ruthless and personal than anything in politics and largely independent of politics, that this struggle is even inseparable from romantic entanglements. He will learn; he will especially learn how easily he can be drawn into such a world despite his high-minded ideals. It is partly this political dimension, and the sweeping philosophical themes introduced explicitly in the dialogue—the

nature of love, the eternity of one's nature, following one's nature or searching for something "better," compromise or struggle with evil—that elevate, or are clearly intended to elevate, the film from some kind of case study of a group of near-psychotic, perverse individuals to the wider reflective level typical of noirs.

At any rate, Michael is quickly entangled by Bannister's wife, Elsa, and Grisby in one plot, a counterplot by Bannister, and a side plot by Broom, whom Bannister has hired to keep him apprised of the first plot. Unfortunately for the viewer, Michael, the hapless "boob" (as he keeps calling himself) is our narrator, or assumes the role of our directorial guide even while someone else is running the show he narrates. Even more confusingly, like many voice-over flashback narrators, he chooses to tell us what happened as a story, putting us in his position at various points in the story (his position of innocence, gullibility, and sheer stupidity), but keeping from us what he only learns at the end. So we are very much at sea, aware only of scores of visual hints flying by (usually in the form of those close-ups of what seem strange or out-of-place reaction shots, some out of focus, many oddly framed) that suggest that virtually nothing is what it seems.

Of course there are many other reasons we are at sea as viewers. Michael's roles as both character and narrator introduce the familiar issue of the trustworthiness of such narration. (He is at once both subject of the narrative and its object, immediately highlighting the distinct ontological feature of the human subject, that it is both subject of a world and object in the world and somehow at the same time.)<sup>16</sup> It seems likely that what we are hearing and seeing is something like Michael's own novel about the event, with him in it, and we have to remember that when we see the somewhat self-serving and self-congratulatory ending, as he vows never again to "quit" his uncompromising stance towards "the bad" and to spend his life forgetting Elsa.<sup>17</sup> His being a novelist, with this film as something like the visual version of the novel,<sup>18</sup> helps explain the frequent flashback problem: how the narrator knows things that from the narrator-*character's* point of view that he could not have known. There are various Hollywood conventions that allow some flexibility on these issues, but in this case those scenes

16. See Mark Graham, "The Inaccessibility of *The Lady from Shanghai*," in *Perspectives on Orson Welles*, ed. Morris Beja (New York, 1995), p. 147.

17. Something he obviously failed to do, having had to return to the past, we might assume, in order to understand it, and having had to write this "novel" of sorts that we have seen. He enacts the Proustian narrational device of showing us the past that led to the narrator's present, a present that itself has returned us to the past and "an endless temporal loop" (*ibid.*, p. 148).

18. I am grateful to Jim Conant for discussions about the importance of Michael's role as a novelist of the events we see from his point of view.

are clearly imagined by our novelist-narrator, and so we are put on guard about their questionable documentary status.<sup>19</sup> So we have to remember that Michael, who indignantly tears up Elsa's card as soon as he learns she is married, at one point later even slapping her, nevertheless "chases a married woman" and accepts five thousand dollars, money he professes to care nothing for, in an insurance fraud scheme as part of a plot to abscond with another man's wife. So it is understandable that Michael has a very great interest, especially with respect to his own self-evaluation, in presenting the story as one about a naïve man deceived by a conniving woman and evil men. "Innocent" or "stupid" are both more preferable to his political self-image than "just as corrupt as everyone else"—hence the unusual strategy. Someone who says "I was a fool, a boob" is in a way asserting his own present superiority to and distance from "what he was then," and there is a kind of excuse in such a description, a laying off of fault to clever, manipulative others, especially when the narrator tells us that he has learned his lesson and will never do this again. But is it plausible that a sailor who has been all over the world, been in several jails, has killed a man and fought in a war and is obviously very interested in women would be the "boob" Michael insists he was?<sup>20</sup>

Besides the voice-over flashback narration and the unusual visual look of the film, there are two other deep connections with standard themes in film noir, and the unreal character of the setting serves to greatly highlight these issues. This is so because there is very little *else* going on, hardly any of the usual domestic business in films other than the activities related to these themes. The atmosphere on board the yacht, the rather obviously named *Circe*, and in its ports of call is highly charged with barely suppressed animosity, hatred, and perverse, sadistic pleasure; in other words, it is an intensified version of the usual noir world. Nothing anyone says to anyone can be relied on; almost everything said by everyone other than Michael is a lie, and many of the lies are expressed in a taunting, sarcastic tone. In the film's main instructional trope, Michael's harrowing account

19. Compare the discussion in J. P. Telotte, *Voices in the Dark: The Narrative Patterns of Film Noir* (Urbana, Ill., 1989), pp. 62–63. In Welles's original plan for the movie there was to be no voice-over, but Columbia, worried about the audience understanding the plot, insisted on it and Welles had to agree, but he used the occasion to add another layer of complexity to the film, hardly simplifying matters.

20. Not to say that he isn't stupid, perhaps even archetypically male stupid: "The activity of women in American movies is frequently unhappy and unsuccessful, and often desperate. But it is there, all over the place. Wherever you turn, the blame's on Mame. What's more, the activity of women is virtually the only intelligent activity in the movies, because men never have time to think" (Michael Wood, *America in the Movies, or, "Santa Maria, It Had Slipped My Mind"* [New York, 1975], p. 65).



FIGURE 6.

of sharks in such a frenzy for blood that they begin to devour themselves, we have our image for what is going on; often characters (especially Bannister) go to such extreme lengths to inflict pain or discomfort or humiliation on others that they put their own goals at great risk and are willing to “devour *themselves*” to satisfy their “taste for blood” (fig. 6).<sup>21</sup>

Secondly the main issue, the problem that generates the action and reaction, concerns the problem we have been focusing on; let us say, colloquially, that it is characters trying to exercise their wills under conditions that lead us to suspect that the presumption of the possibility of such exercise is a mere fantasy. The minimal conditions of such agency appear to be some genuine self-knowledge, control of one’s deliberation (the capacity to step back from one’s commitments, as it is sometimes put), the possible alterability of the future by one’s deeds, and, as we begin to see

21. Michael’s speech about sharks devouring themselves is so obviously lifted from chapter 66 of *Moby Dick* that the point of such a “borrowing” becomes a question. It may have something to do with increasing our sense of Michael’s untrustworthiness. Here is this riveting speech that he represents as one of his experiences off Forteleza, and it turns out to be an account borrowed from a classic novel. Perhaps Welles is making the same point with Michael’s Irish accent, suggesting blarney, fanciful exaggeration for effect. On this latter point about the accent, see Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo, *Noir Anxiety* (Minneapolis, 2003), pp. 49–72.

in this film, some reliable sense of others' intentions, of where one stands in the social world, and *all* of these are very much placed in doubt here. Put in its most abstract terms, each considers him or herself the subject of their deeds and others objects to be used in the furtherance of their plans. And it turns out that each is also treated as object by others with the same assumption. As a result—and it is the most important result suggested by the film—no one, not even Bannister, is or could be really running the show. The strategic and psychological issues have become so complicated that no one can sufficiently master them and run anything, and yet the level of self-interest and therefore distrust has become so massive that it would be naïve and near-suicidal to attempt even to offer any genuine mutuality in this context, as Michael learns. The general consequences of such a fate and such a social world are catastrophic for everyone, as we shall see.

This is partly why the narrator in *The Lady from Shanghai* seems, even by the standards of film noir, unusually dissociated from what he is narrating. He seems to relate the events from something close to a third-person point of view, marveling at the gullibility, foolishness, stupidity, opacity, and strangeness of what he himself did, as if amazed at another person. I have said that action requires a particular sort of self-relation, a form of practical knowledge of myself, necessary for any experience to be the experience of agency, and that seems spectacularly absent here in the *narrated Michael* and available to the *narrating Michael* only in this somewhat dissociated form. (By “dissociated” I mean that the *narrating Michael* seems to have come to a form of self-knowledge that is like coming to believe—perhaps at the suggestion of a psychotherapist—that I am or was jealous or angry or resentful or bewitched without *being* consciously jealous or angry or resentful or bewitched and so without knowing this first-personally. I can come to have opinions about my own mental states and therewith actions that are like what I might believe about another's such states. Ultimately this form of narration allows Michael to narrate what he is guilty of without being *guiltily aware* of those deeds. It allows him literally to walk away from everything at the end, and so it is not a form of alienation that happens to him but a form of “intentional” self-deceit, something that is often the case with flashback voice-overs (as in *Detour* or *Double Indemnity* or, to a lesser extent, *Out of the Past*).<sup>22</sup>

22. For more on this distinction and how important it is philosophically, see David H. Finkelstein, *Expression and the Inner* (Cambridge, 2003), esp. pp. 105, 124–26. A less dissociated narrating Michael might have worked against the temptation to move to a third-person point of view. He might have recollected the events by trying to reimagine what it was like for the narrated Michael, rather than what we have (inferring to gaps in knowledge, marveling at

Moreover, Michael himself seems an advocate of one of the implications about the reflective model of action that is common in many noirs: that that model's insistence on *ex ante* deliberation and resolve is quite exaggerated. There is an intricate conversation with Elsa on board the yacht that brings this up explicitly. Michael had been steering; she takes over from him at a particular moment, and he recounts in effect his own view of practical knowledge (figs. 7–8).

There is a lot compressed in this little scene, and it's one of the most important in the film. There is at the beginning a hair-care product commercial (Glossolusto) we hear on the radio, and it reminds us that the film we are watching and especially Rita Hayworth are mass-culture products, that the film and that object are objects for sale, and that the allure of Hayworth in the film is linked to the same qualities and the same display as the actress's commercial allure on the market. The possible confusion of a self-interested manipulation of desire, with which Elsa is engaged with Michael, with love, is what prompts Michael's question about whether she believes in love at all. We like to think of course that for love to be love at all it must be freely given, that it is my own, that it reflects who I am, and that it is not the result of manipulation by another. But manipulated desire, we are reminded by the radio ad, is the essence of a commercial society, and so the pervasiveness of such manipulation might make this distinction difficult to make.<sup>23</sup> Elsa, as she does several times, had asked Michael for help with something she doesn't need help with (these occasions always have to do with taking off or putting on clothing),<sup>24</sup> and he then asks his question about love. She answers by taking the wheel (as if her response is, I believe in *this*, *being the one who steers*, which in its way is a pretty clear answer), and she recounts two parts of a Chinese proverb that touch on our fatalism theme, one part encouraging passionate love so that, because love never lasts, one will be "cured of love" and the other encour-

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stupidity and foolishness). Such a more subjective narration would be more like a film or novel that took seriously Michael's point of view and so his culpability.

23. See James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts* (Berkeley, 1998), p. 160, and Telotte, *Voices in the Dark*, p. 67. Neither makes much of the fact that such a picture, Michael's own picture, of himself as the passive object of cinematic and commercial manipulation is in keeping with his general strategy, designed to walk away from all of this virtually guilt free, a boob, a babe in woods full of wolves. Naremore comes closest, acknowledging some hidden guilt in Michael, but he does not deal with Michael's control of the narration.

24. This may be a reference to *Gilda*, where the same thing happens a lot, most famously when Gilda asks for help taking off her dress in a mock striptease at the end of her "Put the Blame on Mame" dance.



FIGURE 7.



FIGURE 8.

aging us to always “follow our nature” so we’ll end up as we naturally are. (Elsa’s pose—that she needs Michael’s help—continues quietly in the scene, as Michael frequently intervenes and turns the wheel, presumably to keep her on course. She keeps turning the wheel starboard; he keeps turning it back to port.) Bannister (braying his name for Elsa throughout, reminding her and everyone of what she is obliged to do, be his “lover”)<sup>25</sup> enters to do what he often does, torment them by broadly and obviously implying that he knows why she wants Michael on board (at this point Michael and Elsa probably think he means to let them know that he knows how attracted to each other they are, but he is no doubt also referring to Elsa and Grisby’s plot, which Broom has informed him of). And then Michael makes a bizarre declaration about his relation to his own mind. “*I never make up my mind about anything at all until it’s over and done with.*” He offers this as an explanation for *why* he decided *not* to quit, but it is a strange explanation and of course cannot be literally true. He *has* decided to go on the cruise and recently decided *not* to quit, but nevertheless what he implies becomes ever more plausible (and connected with the frequency of flashbacks in noirs and the belatedness theme). He has no real or finally determinate idea of what he was doing or why until he can see what else he is willing to do and what he was actually involved in, what others intend to do. It is not that he is mindless; there are just many provisional possibilities. To be sure of what one intended is to be sure of what one is committed to doing, and avowals of such intentions are therefore not reports of the already resolved; they are the resolve and are often provisional.<sup>26</sup> Such avowals are the resolutions, and it is not hard to see why no determinate result is yet possible for Michael. He doesn’t, cannot yet know, whether he will do what he avows he will do. This amounts to yet another variation of the theme of fatalism, or the lack of full, clear *ex ante* subjective control over events and their consequences.

The issues raised in this scene also frame the problem of Elsa in an important way. As the title of the film indicates, she is the key, what we must figure out even though we see almost nothing from her point of view. But that is not an accident. From what we can see, she does not seem to have much of a point of view. Her face is often a mask, and the close-ups never do what close-ups are supposed to do: provide a window to the soul. (She never even seems to sweat, although sweat pours off of Bannister and Grisby and Michael.) This association of Elsa with Hayworth as commer-

25. Elsa pointedly calls Michael “beloved,” reminding us that Michael is the passive partner here, not the “lover.”

26. For the avowals-reports distinction, see Richard Moran, *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge* (Princeton, N.J., 2001).

cial product and the way she is shot suggest that the right approach to Elsa cannot be primarily moral or psychological. We should see her in terms of either the vast commercial and patriarchal system that has produced the Bannisters, the “bad” she later says it is futile to fight against, or the vast Hollywood-entertainment-celebrity machine that swallowed up little Margarita Carmen Cansino<sup>27</sup> at a very early age and produced the “product,” Rita Hayworth.<sup>28</sup> (This is complicated. Welles has himself, in order to comment on this system, “manufactured” his own “product” and controlled it in the film in a way that one, in some moods, could call Bannister-esque.)

Secondly, Bannister’s sarcastic “lover” greeting reminds us both of the extraordinary melancholic aura that surrounds Elsa and the pathos of her presence anywhere in the film. It would be heartless and crude to think of her as belonging in the same category as Kitty Marsh, say, the manipulative prostitute in Lang’s *Scarlet Street*. She is acting out a scheme to ensnare and ruin Michael, but there is also an unmistakable genuineness to her attempt to make love to Michael, as if she is herself occasionally ensnared in the trap she is setting for him.<sup>29</sup> Hayworth carries off the part quite well, suggesting both icy resolve underneath the surface and a genuine, great yearning in her scenes with Michael.

We need a breathless plot summary of the rest of the film to arrive at its concluding issues. Elsa (with Grisby’s sly collusion) has convinced Michael that her situation with Bannister has become horrific, intolerable, and she manages to suggest that it has all gotten and will get worse because of Michael, because Grisby saw them kiss (all obviously staged by her), and Bannister more and more suspects them of having an affair. Grisby tells Michael that he, Grisby, is terrified of a nuclear war (I know, it’s just as silly in the film) and wants to get a lot of money and move to a faraway island to be safe. He explains that his partnership with Bannister is insured and that upon the death of one the other will get a huge settlement. So he wants Michael to confess in writing to accidentally shooting Grisby and dumping the body in the bay, where it will have been washed out to sea. (As Bannister later points out, Michael is such a dope that he doesn’t seem to notice that the plan is self-contradictory. If Grisby is killed, how could he possibly collect the

27. Rita Hayworth’s original name.

28. Some of the most sophisticated treatments of this theme—the commercialization of fantasy and its effects—are the films of Max Ophüls, especially *Caught* (1949) and the incomparable *Lola Montes* (1955).

29. She is in this respect a bit like Kathie Moffitt (Jane Greer) in Tourneur’s *Out of the Past*.



FIGURE 9.

insurance money?)<sup>30</sup> Grisby assures Michael that without a body he cannot be prosecuted (another lie that one has to be quite gullible to accept). Michael, having proposed once to Elsa that they flee and been refused for want of money (“Will I take in washing to support you?”) now agrees to the wacky plan for the \$5,000 offered. The scene in which Grisby makes his explicit proposal is beautifully filmed<sup>31</sup> so as to suggest the precipice and danger Michael faces, the craziness of Grisby, and the foolishness of trusting anything he says (fig. 9).

Predictably, none of this is the real plan. Grisby, in cahoots with Elsa, is going to kill Bannister and pin it on Michael. He will get the settlement and presumably split it with Elsa. (Or perhaps she just wants Bannister dead and her free.) He steals Michael’s cap to place it at the scene and will be able to point to the affair with Elsa as motive. Elsa has been careful, we infer later, to establish evidence of the affair by meet-

30. This doesn’t invalidate the plan. Grisby could have designated an heir, a confederate, who would be in on the deal, and so on. But Bannister is still right: Michael doesn’t even raise the question, how will you collect if you are supposed to be dead? And it is just as clear, as Bannister taunts Elsa later with this piece of stupidity, that Elsa had not counted on this problem coming up and has no quick retort. Bannister of course knows that the real plan was for Bannister to be murdered, Grisby to get the insurance benefit, and Elsa to share in the spoils. He is, yet again, taunting her.

31. Except for the weird bits obviously added in a studio later. Welles’s postproduction problems are legendary, but in the case of this film especially dispiriting. Welles filmed the extra scenes but was not present at the year-long studio reediting (and rescoring) and the studio actually cut more minutes from this film than even the notorious butchering of *The Magnificent Ambersons*. See Berthomé and Thomas, *Orson Welles at Work*, pp. 128–42.

ing and kissing Michael in a public aquarium full of schoolchildren and gawking teachers. They are as much on display as the huge (and trapped) fish in the tanks behind them.

But now everything falls apart. Broom, the detective, knows what Grisby and Elsa are planning and demands blackmail money from Grisby, who responds by shooting Broom dead. Grisby tries to continue with the plan, but, we learn later, Elsa realizes that with Broom dead and Bannister likely tipped off they cannot proceed, and she manages to kill Grisby in order to protect herself. In the course of the unfolding of this chaotic plot, Welles again pauses to make a philosophical point about how easily we can ascribe agency—real relations of cause and effect—where there is none.<sup>32</sup> In this case, he displays the power of directorial control over editing and montage. Elsa is at home and does not yet know that Broom has been shot. Michael and Grisby are in a car heading to San Francisco as part of the original plot. Every time Elsa hits the intercom, it looks like she is causing something to happen: the kitchen door to burst open; Michael's car to speed up; the collision with the truck to occur. Yet there is no connection between the events at all, and we are meant to see that there might be a little connection between what *anyone* intends and purports to do and what happens (figs. 10–12).

Since the police have Michael's signed confession for Grisby's murder, which, thanks to Elsa, has actually occurred, they of course arrest him for the murder of Grisby. Bannister offers to defend him, but that simply insures that Michael will be found guilty, and Bannister will have his revenge as Michael waits to be executed.

Right before the verdict is announced, though, Michael fakes a suicide attempt, scooping up and taking some pills, and he eventually escapes. Elsa follows and appears to be trying to help Michael. (We learn later that she has planned on Bannister following her and on killing him and framing Michael for it. The woman is relentless.) They end up hiding in a Chinese theatre, and, with a droll irony, Welles portrays, by means of the complete unintelligibility of the movements and language of the Chinese performers, just what the movie audience must think at this point. The revelations about the conflicting plots are unveiled so quickly and dimly that we really are in such a position; it all looks like Chinese theatre, or a distorting fun house, as we shall soon see. (In a perfect touch, Welles lets us know that

32. George Wilson points to this sequence and makes this point about the narrative order and its implied meaning. I am much indebted to this book for its many insights about narration and point of view, at issue everywhere in film noir. See George Wilson, *Narration in Light: Studies in Cinematic Point of View* (Baltimore, 1986), pp. 1–5.



FIGURE 10.



FIGURE 11.

nothing, however, is mysterious for Elsa, who is immediately at home in this world, speaking fluent Cantonese and making arrangements.)

In the first conversation between Michael and Elsa after he has figured everything out, Welles begins to resolve, at least partly, with two bits of dialogue the issues he has introduced. There is first Michael's question: Haven't you ever found something better to follow than your own nature? And Elsa's stunned reaction, a zombielike, almost stupefied, "no" (fig. 13). This returns us to the Chinese saying about the eternity of human nature, the fleetingness of



FIGURE 12.



FIGURE 13.

love, and what we have now come to learn what Elsa and Bannister and Grisby think human nature eternally requires: try to seize control of the agenda and run the show, or someone else will. One is either subject to another's will or subjects them to one's own; there is no middle ground. (Bannister had made clear in an earlier speech the first necessary condition for this—money—which has bought him social position and great power. But we have seen, and

he has learned, that money and its immense power are still not enough to control Elsa as he wants and needs to.)

However, the Chinese saying was a *proverb*, a recommendation. One simply *is* not one's nature; one opts to follow one's nature or not. The proverb recommends that we do. The Bannister-Elsa-Grisby-Broom assumption is that human nature is, must be, ruthlessly self-serving, evil. The question of whether to follow or not is the question of whether it is futile or not to struggle against one's nature or fate, against evil, or ruthless egoism. Their view: it *is* useless, completely. We are ultimately fated to act this way, despite occasional illusory victories. But what we are shown is that in succumbing to nature they are not conceding or admitting something, as they would like to think. What they appeal to is an excuse about something they've done that they are pretending was not done, just fated. Their fatalism is a piece of massive, self-serving self-deception. They are pledging to do something, act in a way, and that inescapably practical point of view is what they are avoiding, not successfully denying. It is this premise that sets up the consequence in the film, and it is quite an interesting one, one that both qualifies and intensifies the fatalism theme.

(Almost all the flashbacks in the best noirs have this complex double edge: I really couldn't have done otherwise [you can fill in all sorts of reasons here: because of the past, social forces and social necessity, human nature, the ineradicable power of evil, whatever], and so I should be let off the hook; what could a poor guy do? So the narrators are both giving up the assumptions about causally effective agency and yet still appealing to its notion of a condition for agency, just *unfulfilled* in this case. None of these narrators is a *tragic* figure in other words, none like the greatest flashbacker, Oedipus in *Oedipus at Colonus*, who is willing to say, I suffered those deeds more than I did them, but just thereby admitting I *did* them even as I suffered them; I still did them and must bear their burden.)

The funhouse-mirror image shows us the immediate consequence of this deception and mistrust—an inability to distinguish in a world of such constant strategizing and treachery the real other from a mere reflection, a pose, something staged. The surprising further consequence is that since each cannot determine where each is in relation to the other, they cannot effectively maneuver, they cannot distinguish their true position—*themselves*—from the multiple reflections either. They don't know if the other is shooting at them or their reflection, whether they are shooting at another or at a reflected image (figs. 14–15).

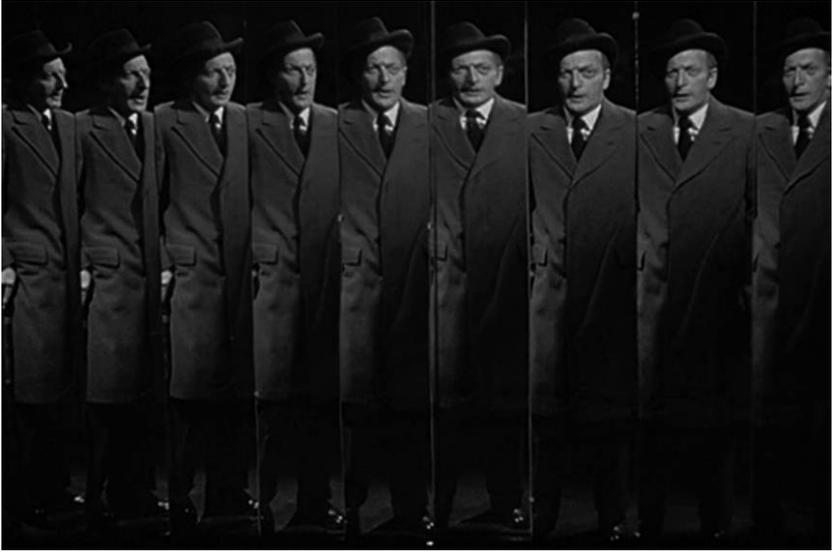


FIGURE 14.



FIGURE 15.

If agency can be considered some sort of achievement, with degrees of realization, an achievement that depends as much on reliable, trustworthy knowledge of others as it does on self-knowledge (if the latter is impossible without the former), then a condition of such achievement is also a social achievement, the establishment of a kind of relation with others *without* the reflections or the overcoming of the self-serving “natural” condition of anxiety, distrust, and treachery. This is of course what Michael’s apparently naïve leftist politics aspires to, and the ending seems at least to give two cheers for the aspiration. The extraordinary dialectical consequence of the absence of this social condition is stated with crystal clarity by Bannister (thus also accepting Michael’s shark image)<sup>33</sup>: “Of course, killing you is killing myself. It’s the same thing. But you know, I’m pretty tired of both of us.” He not only means that he is willing to die, to “devour himself” as the shark image has it, to get revenge on Elsa, but that his manipulative control of Elsa has paradoxically left him slavishly dependent on her, completely and inextricably bound to her. Their fates have become indistinguishable, rather than the master-slave relation he had created.

The ensuing last conversation between the dying Elsa and the rather superior Michael has left few viewers satisfied. Andrew Britton even calls it “indisputably, one of the cinema’s most disgraceful endings.”<sup>34</sup> Michael lectures Elsa that she was wrong to think you could make your own terms with “the bad”; rather the bad ends up making its own terms for you. She responds that one could struggle with the bad, but what’s the use? He remarks that, yes, you can’t win, but you can’t lose either, as long as you don’t quit, and he says he won’t ever “quit again.” Presumably he is referring to his complicity in what was essentially insurance fraud, abandoning his high-minded egalitarian ideals in pursuit of a rich “married woman,” desperate for the funds necessary to keep her comfortable. He leaves Elsa screaming that she doesn’t want to die, and he walks back out into that “bright guilty world” he has been so critical of but without much in the way of any detectable guilt. The camera pulls far back and high up, encouraging us, I think, to get some distance on Michael as he shrinks and, quite significantly, is shot walking away from everything (fig. 16). We still hear his account tying everything up and drawing his lesson, and the question is what we make of him from this higher, presumably (if we have been paying attention) superior perspective.

As I have tried to indicate, we are given several indications through-

33. Bannister had originally responded by saying to Grisby that if Grisby were any kind of lawyer, he would realize that being called a shark was a compliment.

34. Andrew Britton, “*The Lady from Shanghai*: Betrayed by Rita Hayworth,” *The Movie Book of Film Noir*, ed. Ian Cameron (London, 1992), p. 219. He also rightly calls Michael a “conceited prig” (p. 221) but wrongly keeps assuming that this reflects on Welles also.



FIGURE 16.

out, none so clear as the self-conscious literary language of the shark story, that we are in effect *in Michael's novel* and that one of the purposes of that novel seems to be to allow him to put this sort of narrative together and try to make it credible, above all to himself. (He says he will forget Elsa, but the story is evidence that he cannot, and what he cannot free himself from is this attempt to exculpate himself.) I have suggested that it is not credible, but the effect of this is that in an unintended and ironic way Michael *does* emerge as a diminished agent (more fated than agent), but by *his own* self-deceived view of himself. The pose he presents, the example of the maxim that everybody is somebody's fool, is not a hypocritical attempt to deceive the audience, viewers, readers. He believes it and by believing it accepts a kind of diminished status and so *is* diminished. He reveals that he is simply incapable of registering and acknowledging his own culpability, the quite negligible difference that separates him from the sharks, and that lack is a limitation, too.<sup>35</sup> His viewing himself as such a diminished

35. In the shark story, he had told how his shark tore itself loose from the hook, and when they all return to Sausalito, Michael remarks that for the whole voyage he was "hooked." He is one of the sharks and cannot admit that about himself.

agent, in other words, constitutes him as one; he becomes the diminished object of the clever manipulation of others, and so his own relation to his deeds becomes for him constituted by such a self-image. It would be naïve to insist that he nevertheless could have faced what he did more honestly. Michael is self-deceived, not hypocritical, and he is self-deceived because of what he is, and he is what he is because of what he can and cannot admit about himself. Thus in yet another way Heraclitus is right: *ethos anthropoi daimon*, character is destiny.<sup>36</sup>

36. Perhaps the ultimate noir fable is the one recounted by Gregory Arkadin in Welles's *Mr. Arkadin* (1955). A frog and a scorpion meet by a river, and the scorpion asks for a ride across. The frog expresses concern that if he agrees to allow the scorpion on his back, the scorpion will sting him with his fatal sting. The scorpion replies that that would be illogical; they would both drown. The frog accepts the clear logic of this argument and agrees. But, in the middle of the river, the scorpion does sting the frog. As the frog and the scorpion begin to sink, the frog asks, "where was the logic in that?" and the scorpion replies, "this is my character, and there is no logic in character."