The Problem of Escape in American Film Noir

Cinema, Philosophy, Theology

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ABSTRACT: Following developments in the last decades in the philosophical and theological studies of film, this study investigates film noir from the classic Hollywood era (1940-1959) from this perspective. It presents the key ideas behind the fields of film-philosophy and film-theology. Turning more specifically to film noir, the study addresses themes that come to the fore in these films, focusing especially on the depiction of human existence as characterized by a need for escape, that is at the same time impossible. The set of questions that arises with this starting point is developed through readings of a number of films, most lengthily Laura (directed by Otto Preminger, 1944) and Criss Cross (Robert Siodmak, 1949). It is suggested that film noir in interesting ways problematizes the persistent post-Enlightenment view of the subject as first and foremost rational and autonomous, and further, that film noir can be seen as following the Christian doctrine of original sin in seeing human existence as standing in need of redemption, while holding that it is at best uncertain if such redemption is possible.

KEYWORDS: film noir, film-theology, film-philosophy, original sin
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1. INTRODUCTION

Characters in film noir often overestimate their capacity to begin. Their desire to start over from a brand new, wholly undetermined situation is disappointed as they find themselves riveted to an existence where every new beginning is a mere continuation. “I wanted to get away from something. I failed miserably,” says the female main character in Million Dollar Weekend (1948), and thus aptly sums up the predicament of so many noir protagonists. She, a young woman, has killed her cruel husband, and while the police have ruled the death an accident an acquaintance of the couple reveals that he witnessed the fight that led to the husband falling from the balcony, and his price for not telling the cops that it was a premeditated murder is half the life insurance money, and the woman. So there she is, having gone to Honolulu only to find a blackmailer following her and confiding to a stranger (a stranger who, as it happens, in his own desire for a new beginning has just stolen a million dollars from the stockbroker firm where he works). “I had hoped that I could forget everything that’s passed,” she says. “I was looking forward to the beginning of a bright new life.”

“Film noir” is the label that French film critics, after the end of World War II when they again had the opportunity to see American movies, applied to a cycle of crime films that displayed a darker, more pessimistic outlook and a more psychological bent than did the crime movies of the 1930s. An easy way to give an indication of the mood evoked in these movies is to rattle off a list of titles: Desperate (1947), Cornered (1945), Caught (1949), Caged (1950), Trapped (1949), Framed (1947), The Set-Up (1949), Pitfall (1948), Quicksand (1950), Possessed (1947), Strange Illusion (1945), Dark Delusion (1947), The Dark Past (1948), No Way Out (1950), One-Way Street (1950), and Destination Murder (1950). The noir world is one of desperation, disappointment, and miserable failure.

1.1 THE PROBLEM

I think film historian Imogen Sara Smith gets it exactly right when she writes that “the force driving
noir stories is the urge to escape: from the past, from the law, from the ordinary, from poverty, from constricting relationships, from the limitations of the self.”\(^1\) The brief mention of *Million Dollar Weekend* above provides one example of such a story and more will follow. But this urge to escape is hopeless. As Smith continues: “Noir stories are powered by the need to escape, but they are structured around the impossibility of escape: their fierce, thwarted energy turns inward. The ultimate noir landscape, immeasurable as the ocean and confining as a jail cell, is the mind.”\(^2\) Film noir provides harsh lessons in limitation but understands very well the impulse to revolt against these limits, and explores the psychological and existential ramifications of the double bind persons find themselves in.

Rather than seeing this structure – the need for escape and the impossibility of escape – as a mere storytelling trope, in this essay, I wish to consider it seriously as (part of) a certain conception of human existence. Film noirs are almost always about crime, but the situation that Smith describes speaks more broadly to what it means to be human.

The purpose is this study is to develop this “noir anthropology,” and as a first step to this end I seek to catalog a number of areas where the simultaneous need for and impossibility of is felt, such as, as Smith says, one’s relation to the past, the law, and oneself. I am here close to Maria Essunger who, in relation to literature, has suggested that it is appropriate to take “worldview questions” as one’s guiding light in one’s studies. Worldview questions (an unsatisfying translation of the Swedish *livsåskådningsfrågor*) is an open-ended list of open, existential questions, which, Essunger says, have no final answers but are characterized by a high degree of urgency.\(^3\) In this vein, I will show how film noir highlights a certain cloudiness, or enigmaticity, with regard to questions of truth, justice, rational agency, mortality, love, and sexual desire, and the role of these in subject formation.

As a second step, having identified a number of questions and seeking to deepen the analyses of these, I place the lessons of film noir in conversation with relevant thinkers and ideas. One rewarding “dialogue partner” on the matters that come to the fore in film noir, I suggest, is the Christian doctrine of original sin. This doctrine, of course, has had multiple interpretations, formulations and reformulations, over two millennia. Philosopher Stephen Mulhall summarizes its

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1 Smith 2011: 2
2 Smith 2011: 3
3 Essunger 2005: 31
core idea as a conception of human nature as “tragically flawed, perverse in its very structure or constitution”:

Human beings are not only naturally capable of acting – even perhaps disposed to act – sinfully, but are always already turned against themselves, against the true and against the good, by virtue of their very condition as human.4

Sinfulness, on this picture, is part of our constitution as humans, and not the result of particular sinful acts.

In his short 2005 book *Philosophical Myths of the Fall*, Mulhall aims to show that the philosophers Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein can all be read as, in different ways, seeking to preserve a “recognizable descendent” of the original sin doctrine, a conception of human nature as “always already averting us from the relation to truth, comprehension, and clarity that is nevertheless our birthright.”5 While retaining an idea of humanity as “fallen” and in need of redemption, these philosophers at the same time deny that a transcendent or divine source is necessary for such redemption to occur. Thus, Mulhall writes,

these philosophers want to keep a conception of human beings as in need of redemption (rather than, say, improvement or self-realization) and as capable of it, but to relocate the source of that redemption within (or at least on the borders of) the world of human experience. They will neither attenuate their sense of the constitutive depths to which our difficulties must be traced to accord with a more generally secularized conception of the self and its world, nor accept that acknowledging the depth of such difficulties requires the invocation of a divine source to which the self must relate itself and its world if it is to be redeemed from them.6

Mulhall’s readings of the philosophers in question disclose new possibilities in the interpretation of their writings, but also in the interpretation of the doctrine of original sin. In showing thematic links between the doctrine and the worldview found in film noir, my hope is to, in a similar way, show how there might be mutual benefits for the interpretation of both.

I discuss original sin especially in Chapter 2.2. Other resources for the interpretation of film noir that I discuss in the essay – that likewise might find in film noir a resource in their own interpretation – include existential philosophy and Greek tragedy.

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4 Mulhall 2005: 6
5 Mulhall 2005: 11
6 Mulhall 2005: 11
In this essay, my focus is on film noir from the classic Hollywood era, which, it is generally agreed, lasted from around 1940 to 1959. The study is located at an intersection between film studies, philosophy, and theology.

1.2.1 Film Noir in Film History

I will begin with some remarks from the perspective of film history. IMDb (The Internet Movie Database) has 988 titles listed under the genre designation “film-noir.” As of January 2024, the earliest of these are from 1927 and the latest from 1958. Of the titles, 4 are from the 1920s, 83 from the 1930s, 443 from the 1940s, and 458 from the 1950s. 928 of them are American. Most of the other titles are British, and there are the odd French, German, Japanese, and Argentine titles. Scrolling through the list, some of the inclusions and exclusions will give pause. The non-American inclusions especially seem fairly random, as one could easily name many more if one wishes to include “international” noir. Some would argue for the inclusion of what is often called “neo-noir,” films from after the classic era that are recognizable descendents of the movement, and one may then note that the prefix “neo-” begins to seem problematic as the list includes films from seven decades. Given my focus on classic Hollywood noir, however, I will not discuss these questions here.

The “standard account” of film noir, which I do not seek to question in this essay, would call the titles from the ‘20s and ‘30s “proto-noir” – forerunners to be sure, but not noir proper. On variants of this account, _The Maltese Falcon_ (1941), directed by John Huston and starring Humphrey Bogart as private detective Sam Spade, often gets the nod as the film that inaugurated the cycle. Insofar as one sees film noir as a movement it was certainly the case that the success of _The Maltese Falcon_ opened doors (and wallets) that allowed for the production of similar films, and that in Bogart’s portrayal of Spade American cinema obtained what Eddie Muller calls a “new archetype” which facilitated a new kind of storytelling.\(^7\) The imperial phase of film noir would begin in 1944 (more on that soon), an apex was reached around 1949, and the 1950s saw a gradual decline.

IMDb, as I said, puts its end date for film noir at 1958, but to me it seems hard to come up

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\(^7\) As of January 2024.

\(^8\) Muller 2021: 88
with a valid reason why a film like *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959) should be left out. For an endpoint to the classic Hollywood noir era, I find Eddie Muller’s suggestion that *Psycho* (1960), directed by Alfred Hitchcock, marks such an end to be inspired. As Muller notes, *Psycho* starts out very much as a film noir. The protagonist is a secretary who has embezzled $40,000 from the real estate office where she works, and is now on the run: “the volatile sexuality leading to criminal behavior, the moral ambivalence, the desperate flight,” Muller writes. “All the tropes and imagery were firmly in place.” Then she decides to stop for the night at Bates Motel. As she meets her end in the film’s iconic shower scene, Muller suggests that this was also the end of classic film noir, now – in that sequence – replaced by a cinema of pure sensation.

As I have said, “film noir” as a designation for certain films was a coinage of French critics. The extent to which Hollywood filmmakers were unaware of what it was they were creating is sometimes overstated. Reading material from the time shows that artists and critics alike understood that something had shifted in the tone of crime movies. The term “film noir” was not in use, but as Robert Wise – director of such noir films as *Born to Kill* (1947), *The Set-Up* (1949), and *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959) – says, the filmmakers certainly “knew what a dark mood meant.”

In 1945, the *New York Times* columnist Lloyd Shearer noted the ongoing trend “toward the wholesale production of lusty, hard-boiled, gut-and-gore crime stories, all fashioned on a theme with a combination of plausibly motivated murder and studded with high-powered Freudian implication.” He also took the time to mock psychoanalytic explanations for the popularity of these films, and that such explanations were fit for mockery seems to indicate that they were already fairly well-known:

Hollywood says the moviegoer is getting this type of story because he likes it, and psychologists explain that he likes it because it serves as a violent escape in tune with the violence of the times, a cathartic for pent-up emotions. These learned men, in a mumbo-jumbo all their own, assert that because of the war the average moviegoer has become calloused to death, hardened to homicide and more capable of understanding a murderer’s motives. After watching a newsreel showing the horrors of a German concentration camp, the movie fan, they say, feels no shock, no remorse, no moral repugnance when the screen villain puts a bullet through his wife’s head or shoves her off a cliff and runs away with his

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9 Muller 2021: 234
10 In Porfirio, Silver & Ursini (eds.) 2002: 127
11 Shearer 1999: 9
This amusing diatribe, from the poison pen of a gossip columnist, is interesting given that – as we see in Chapter 1.2.2 below – psychoanalysis (particularly Lacanian) was to be a dominant influence on film theory up until the 1990s when critics about as charitable as Shearer would successfully dethrone it.

Shearer’s article credits *Double Indemnity* (1944) as the first in this new cinematic cycle of crime, and finds as a likely explanation for it being made that the people at Paramount Pictures thought that the novel was an exciting yarn at that they could buy the rights cheaply. After Paramount had a hit with this film, Shearer notes, Hollywood followed the predictable pattern of “follow the leader” and the other studios wanted a piece of the action. So, all in noir’s pivotal year 1944, RKO made *Murder, My Sweet*, Universal made *Phantom Lady*, and Twentieth Century Fox made *Laura* – all big films. So, Shearer writes, “[t]he trickle swelled into a torrent and a trend was born.”

Why noir happened as it did when it did was certainly due to a confluence of many elements – business related, political, artistic. Muller’s *Dark City: The Lost World of Film Noir* (1998, revised and expanded edition 2021) does a good job of showing how the films (including the sense of paranoia found in them) were very much a product of the Hollywood life of the era. As for the artistic background out of which film noir grew – most importantly American hard-boiled literature and German expressionist cinema – Foster Hirsch’s *The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir* (1981), Chapters 2 and 3, is instructive (as the book is also on other noir matters). Mark Osteen’s *Nightmare Alley: Film Noir and the American Dream* (2013) gives a compelling account of the political stakes in film noir, especially its potent challenge to the “American Dream” of upward mobility, free enterprise, and personal liberty.

Film noir is the topic of many monographs, anthologies, articles, documentaries, and podcasts. I have already mentioned Imogen Sara Smith, and her work on noir, including in her position as editor-in-chief for *Noir City*, the magazine, 3 or 4 issues each year, produced by the Film Noir Foundation (of which Muller is founder and president), is recommendable for all interested in the topic. The list could be made longer, but I will finally just mention the four volumes of *Film

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12 Shearer 1999: 9
13 Shearer 1999: 12
Noir Reader, edited by Alain Silver and James Ursini (with the addition of Robert Porforio for Volume 3) (1996-2004) which collects many important articles on the topic.

1.2.2 Film and Philosophy

Since its establishment as an academic discipline, film theory has tried different philosophical models as its theoretical and methodological basis. From the 1970s the reigning paradigm was a minestrone of (predominantly French) psychoanalysis, Marxism, semiotics, structural linguistics, feminism, and ideology critique in different constellations. During the 1990s debates broke out where this paradigm, given the name “Grand Theory,” was said to have arrived at a dead end and that analytic philosophy had better tools to take film theory forward. The program of this movement has been named analytic-cognitivist, and the figureheads in putting it forward were David Bordwell and Noël Carroll.

The heated debates did not always deal with the underlying philosophical questions. As Robert Sinnerbrink, in his clear and insightful New Philosophies of Film: Thinking Images (2011), points out with regard to these debates, the cognitivists’ critique of so-called Grand Theory hinges on certain assumptions about the nature of film and cognition, assumptions that are also relevant for the themes of this essay. Whatever the failings of “Grand Theory,” it is clear that, in its aims, it seeks to question two key assumptions of the new analytic-cognitivist paradigm. These, Sinnerbrink writes, are,

(1) that the human being is a rational autonomous agent whose cognitive powers are not subject to irrational ‘unconscious’ forces or to ideological manipulation; and (2) that film is a popular form of entertainment that does not have any pernicious ideological function, that operates using transparent visual and narrative techniques, and that can be analyzed and understood in broadly ‘naturalistic’ terms (with reference to physical, physiological, biological and evolutionary processes).

Thus, at the root of the debates between ‘Grand Theory’ and the analytic-cognitivist paradigm was a disagreement “concerning human nature and the relationship between subjectivity and culture.”

This being the case, there was a tendency to talk past one another in a polemical tone. The arguments presented in the debate often missed the mark. As Sinnerbrink notes when discussing

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14 At the time of writing, I was unaware that an expanded second edition of this book was released in 2022.
15 Sinnerbrink 2011: 16-17
16 Sinnerbrink 2011: 17
the analytic-cognitivist critique of “Grand Theory’s” use of psychoanalytic theory, “[t]o cite commonsense intuitions as evidence against a claim that such intuitions may be specious is to beg the question.” Regrettably or refreshingly depending on one’s outlook, the analytic-cognitivist camp emerged victorious and the “Grand Theory” paradigm was written off as no longer fashionable nonsense. In recent years, however, questions of ideology have returned to the fore of film studies, not so much concerning capitalism but in relation to questions about race and sexual exploitation.

These debates could be said to concern the philosophy of film. Parallel to these debates, however, another way of figuring the relationship between philosophy and film has grown popular, one that has received the name film-philosophy. This is an approach I utilize in this essay. The “founding fathers” of this approach are Stanley Cavell and Gilles Deleuze. The most exciting proposal here, I think, is the idea of film as philosophy. I referenced above Stephen Mulhall’s book on original sin, and Mulhall is also a central character among the proponents of this thesis. Here is Mulhall’s proposition in a neat soundbite:

I do not look to these films as handy or popular illustrations of views and arguments properly developed by philosophers; I see them rather as themselves reflecting on and evaluating such views and arguments, as thinking seriously and systematically about them in just the ways that philosophers do. Such films are not philosophy’s raw material, nor a source for its ornamentation; they are philosophical exercises, philosophy in action – film as philosophizing.

A film is not raw data that has no voice of its own in how it should be interpreted. In the famous slogan of Cavell, “the film thinks.” Mulhall’s position is sometimes called the “strong” or “bold” version of the claim for film as philosophy. Among the thinkers holding a similar view are Sinnerbrink and Robert Pippin. Some prefer more moderate versions of the proposal, and others dismiss it altogether. The finer points of these debates (for example how one should understand the “in just the same ways” part in the Mulhall quote above) fall outside the scope of this essay. As a way of side-stepping some of the issues involved while retaining what is at the heart of the “film as philosophy” thesis, let me just quote a rhetorically effective run-on sentence from Pippin:

I am happy enough to consider films just as such as a contribution to philosophy, and as

17 Sinnerbrink 2011: 69
18 Mulhall 2008: 4
19 See Sinnerbrink 2011: 117-135
philosophy, but if someone prefers to call films forms of reflective thought that illuminate something of general significance about the philosophical issues of self-knowledge, knowledge of others, the limits of moral appraisal, the relations of dependence and independence in a social form of life, the poisonous effects of unequal and arbitrary power on oppressed and oppressor alike, the role of fantasy in romantic life, vehicles to show us the limitations of conventional assumptions about intentional agency or individual responsibility, or the relation between individual and community, and any number of other issues that will come up in the following, and that this contribution is substantial and genuine even if not conveyed in the form of discursive argumentation, I can’t see much point in insisting that that contribution should or should not itself be called “philosophy.”

In this essay, I engage with Mulhall’s thoughts on original sin more than his film-philosophy, although the latter too remains an influence. As is, as is perhaps already evident, the work of Sinnerbrink. One of Pippin’s film-philosophy books is devoted to film noir, and how noir films treat the problem of agency and fatalism. I will discuss this book in Part 3.

Important, the claim that some films are, in themselves (and not in virtue of the intentions of, for example, the director), philosophical exercises is not based in some theory. It must be shown from case to case, and the way to do this is through philosophically informed film criticism. The proof must be in the proverbial pudding, in the interpretations of particular films. As Mulhall likes to put it, there must, in film-philosophy, be a priority of the particular.

1.2.3 Film and Theology

“A religious interpretation of film constitutes just one of many possible interpretations, and one which has traditionally been shirked by film and religious theorists alike,” says a book from 2001. “In recent years we have seen a surge of interest in religion and film studies,” says one from 2003. In one from 2007, we read that “the past ten years or so have witnessed a remarkable growth in scholarship predicated on the religion-film interface.” Since this boom around the turn of the millennium the diverse field of Religion and Film – as its come to be known – holds a steady position with an ever-expanding list of monographs and anthologies, and also two peer-reviewed journals, to show for itself. Within this field, a number of more or less distinct approaches have

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20 Pippin 2020: 6
21 Pippin 2012
23 Deacy 2001: 90
24 Lyden 2003: 1
25 Wright 2007: 11
developed.  

There were of course people who wrote on film and religion before this boom. This “first wave,” S. Brent Plate writes, tended to stay away from popular Hollywood films and focused mostly on “art cinema” and the work of a few European and Japanese directors. This, Plate speculates, likely had less to do with an “elitist” attitude on the part of the scholars and more to do with a wish to have their work taken seriously within academia (“After all, who could argue against the seriousness with which Bergman or Kurosawa portrayed religious matters?”) If film noir now, some eight decades after Double Indemnity premiered, remains “popular” or if it has aged into prestige, or if it is neither, I am not sure.

I will say a word about some of the different approaches that have over time crystallized in the field. Given the empirically demonstrable fact that many people turn to film as a resource in shaping or reshaping their view of themselves and the world (and just this is one area of research), it is but a small step to say that films can fulfill the same function as traditional religions. If one, further, takes the view that something’s status as a religion should be judged on the basis of its function, then one has the basic idea behind the film as religion thesis. Here attention is given to film’s ability to produce modern myths and variants of ritual that occur among fans. In the case of noir, the Noir City film festivals that for 20 years have been arranged by the Film Noir Foundation in cities around America, where people make it a yearly tradition and dress up in fine 1940s garb for the film screenings, might be the object of study.

Closer to film-philosophy, and to my approach, is film as theology as this thought has recently been developed by Joel Mayward, what Mayward also calls theocinematrics. His Mulhall-inspired claim is that “certain films can truly do, not merely depict, theological reflection.” Mayward seeks to demonstrate this through readings of the films by Belgian brother director team Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne.

One strategy that Mayward is suspicious of when it comes to theological film interpretation is that of dialogue, not so much in theory but in the way it is practiced:

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26 For a fuller survey of the field than I give here, see Solano 2022.
27 Plate 2005
29 Mayward 2023. It would likely be interesting to compare Mayward’s theological interpretations of the Dardennes’s films with those of a film-philosopher like Pippin (Pippin 2020: 231-256).
Many of the writings on film-and-theology since the 1970s to the present day have been couched in the term, “dialogue,” arguably the most prevalent subtitle for film-theology publications. Dialogue is wonderful, as long as it is truly a dialogue: a genuinely egalitarian back-and-forth exchange of ideas marked by giving and receiving. Despite the stated intentions, the dialogical approach of many theologians and biblical scholars remains one of theological dominance, where theology has both the first and last word in the conversation.

Practitioners of so-called dialogical approaches have not lived up to their promise but reveal a certain “theological imperialism” in their treatment of films. This word of warning is something I take with me as my approach, as stated in Chapter 1.1, indeed aims for a kind of mutually enriching dialogue, for instance between the doctrine of original sin and the worldview found in film noir (although, admittedly, I will in this essay only sketch what this dialogue might be about and not carry it out). Also, contrary to the tendency described by Mayward, in my account (the traditional mode of doing) theology is the more quiet partner in what dialogue there is, but what it has to say is taken seriously.

Within the field of Film and Religion, one scholar who has given particular attention to film noir is Christopher Deacy, and his interests are related to ones with which I am concerned in this study. In *Screen Christologies: Redemption and the Medium of Film* (2001) he uses elements of the “film as religion” approach and argues that cinema is, or can be, a site of religious activity. In a more theological mode, he claims that film noir, in its refusal of any easy escapism, can be seen as confronting questions of the need for redemption from a state of sin. I will consider Deacy’s account in Chapter 2.2.2.

### 1.3 Method and Material

Sinnerbrink boldly states that “in all good film philosophy, it is films themselves that invite us.” Elsewhere, he again speaks of invitation: “It is only fitting that films inviting the viewer to think, to feel, and to question, should have their invitations accepted.” Phenomenologically, Sinnerbrink is likely correct that, in the cases of films that will become for a viewer a companion in philosophical and/or theological reflection, it is the film that makes the first move, so to speak. The film extends an

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30 Mayward 2019; see also Mayward 2023: 22-25
31 Sinnerbrink 2012: 163
32 Sinnerbrink 2011: 138
invitation to the viewer to think in new ways. An invitation, as is the hope in the Britney Spears song, can indeed set us free to know each other better, granting permission to experiences that might otherwise be out of one’s purview.

The material I investigate is a number of film noirs, films whose invitations I have fully accepted. The interpretations showcase themes typical of the genre, as well as elements particular to the individual films. As for the choices of which films receive individual attention among the many possible candidates, I can see no adequate justification beyond the interpretations themselves. This is in accord with the principled priority of the particular in film-philosophy/theology. If the interpretations work, the choices were probably correct.

When considering the practices of film-philosophy and theocinematics, something that must be taken into account is the way the act of watching movies has changed in recent decades with the rise of home video and now the internet. The ease with which movies are now available to watch and re-watch at our leisure without having to adhere to what is playing when at a cinema or on television, as well as the possibility to pause, rewind, and so on has transformed the possibilities for “close readings” of movies. The internet has also made so much information readily available. After a few clicks on the computer IMDb presented me with a list of some 800 films from the classic era of Hollywood noir, and it would not take too many more clicks for me to find most of them ready to watch. If one is trying to write about a certain film, this also changes the way one views it. One might then perhaps speak of methodologies of viewing.

What I have said about Sinnerbrink’s claim that certain films give their viewers invitations to philosophize on certain matters can, I think, be developed by considering some methodological remarks from Essunger, regarding the study of worldviews in novels. One cannot, Essunger writes, come to a literary text with ready-made questions and expect to find ready-made answers. The works themselves must be allowed to play a part in setting the terms for the inquiry. Once this has happened – once one has accepted the work’s invitation to go to certain places – then concrete questions to be analyzed can – and ideally do – appear, emanating from the works themselves.

This is how I proceed in this essay. I suppose you could ask any film or film genre about original sin, but after I have presented the world of noir I will have failed if it feels as if I am trying to impose

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33 Essunger 2005: 29
34 Essunger 2005: 30
altogether alien doctrines and trains of thought upon these films in the continuation of the analyses.

I indicated in Chapter 1.2.2 the distinction between philosophy of film and film-philosophy. Sinnerbrink argues that this distinction is best thought about as a difference between rationalist and romanticist approaches to theorizing film. Rather than being rivaling combatants, these approaches might also be seen as complementary, doing different things by different means. Whereas the former (represented by philosophy of film in the analytic-cognitivist paradigm) will seek to emulate the methodologies of the natural sciences and provide causal explanations for various aspects related to film, the latter (film-philosophy) – assuming that the rationalists’ causal explanations are not able to exhaustively capture the meaning of a film – precedes hermeneutically, by interpreting, and I have indicated above what I see as some of the demands films place on their interpretors. As Sinnerbrink concisely summarizes matters, “hermeneutic theories attempt to describe, interpret or analyze with reference to other interpretative communities; explanatory theories seek to present causal explanations that solve theoretical problems or integrate with established bodies of empirical knowledge.” One should also in this context clarify a possible ambiguity regarding the word “theory,” given that the distinction between what is here called hermenetutical and explanatory theories is sometimes stated as a distinction between criticism and theory.

1.4 Disposition

The essay has two main parts.

In Part 2.1, I present a thematic overview of the noir genre through discussions of the films *Gilda* (1946) and *Laura* (1944), and a few others that I touch on more briefly. In Part 2.2, I suggest that these themes can be fruitfully placed in dialogue with the doctrine of original sin. As for my discussion of original sin, I look at contributions from the accounts of three thinkers, of which I have already mentioned Mulhall and Deacy. In addition to these, I look at Martin Luther’s commentary to Genesis 3, the biblical account of Adam and Eve’s eating of the forbidden fruit and falling into a state of sin.

35 Sinnerbrink 2011: 7
36 Sinnerbrink 2011: 24
When it comes to a doctrine as important and controversial as original sin there are a million ways one could approach it. A different gallery of interlocutors could have been chosen – Augustine, Julian of Norwich, Pascal, and Simone Weil to name only a few candidates. What I present here is obviously a very small part of the story and I choose to highlight aspects the help facilitate a dialogue with film noir.

In Part 3, I narrow the focus and give a detailed interpretation of the film *Criss Cross* (1949), directed by Robert Siodmak. Here I track the way in which questions of fatalism and deception (including self-deception) dealt with in the film.
2. NOIR’S WORLD OF SIN

“Film noirs were distress flares launched onto America’s movie screens by artists working the night shift at the Dream Factory,” writes Eddie Muller. Some of the flares were mortars, “blasting their message with an urgency aimed at shaking up the status quo,” others firecrackers, “startling but playful diversions.” Either way, Muller writes, “the whiff of cordite carried the same warning: we’re corrupt.”³⁷ I present this world of corruption in the first part of this chapter. In a gesture that Muller would likely scoff at, him not being impressed with the airs of academic interpretations and preferring a fact-based journalistic approach to films, I ask in the second part of this chapter if our understanding of this corruption has something to gain by putting film noir in dialogue with thinkers such as Martin Luther and others and their understanding of the corruption of man thematized in relation to the Christian doctrine of original sin, and, vice versa, if theology here has something to gain by studying film noir.

2.1 MALAISE MOVIES

Paul Schrader, in a famous 1972 essay, says that what defined noir was precisely its mood and tone.³⁸ For a first adumbration of the noir mood I turn to Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton’s very influential A Panorama of American Film Noir (1955), the first book-length treatment of the topic:

> the moral ambivalence, criminal violence, and contradictory complexity of situations and motives all combine to give the public a shared feeling of anguish or insecurity, which is the identifying sign of film noir at this time. All the works in this series exhibit a consistency of an emotional sort; namely, the state of tension created in the spectators by the disappearance of their psychological bearings. The vocation of film noir has been to create a specific sense of malaise.³⁹

³⁷ Muller 2021: ix
³⁸ Schrader 1996: 53
³⁹ Borde & Chaumeton 2002: 13
If the noir genre had received its name from the mood the films evoke (in the way that thrillers, suspense, and horror have) we might speak of malaise movies. For characters as well as viewers, the world of noir is one where one's psychological – and, I would say, existential – bearings are rendered uncertain. Such a mood, and the problems it gives rise to, is what will be investigated in this part of the essay in relation to particular films.

I should state up front that my interpretations of films focus very much on plots. This focus could be criticized. Sinnerbrink has an argument in this regard concerning precisely the mood and world of films. Clearly drawing on Heidegger’s account of moods in *Being and Time*, Sinnerbrink argues that mood, or *Stimmung*, is primary in the disclosure of (cinematic) worlds, and that this mood is determined by “the aesthetic dimensions of the image” rather than the narrative.\(^\text{40}\) Thus, the study of cinematic worlds should attend more to feature such as framing, tempo, and lighting and less on the plot. One takes his point, but I could defend myself here by noting that in film noir narratives do not flow smoothly, and, for me, all the snags, false starts, and backtracking contribute much to the noir mood. As Pippin notes, “in many noirs, one has to pause often in plot summaries,”\(^\text{41}\) and I find this feature of the films intriguing.

### 2.1.1 The Problem of Beginnings and Endings

Take *Gilda* (1946): “I was born last night when you met me in that alley. That way I’m no past and all future, see? And I like it that way.” The line is said by Johnny Farrell (played by Glenn Ford) to Ballin Mundson (George Macready). Johnny, an American gambler and a skilled cheat with dice and cards, has just arrived in Argentina. Mundson is the owner of a casino and Johnny is trying to get a job. It is also suggested, about as clearly as a Hollywood film of that time could be in depictions of homosexuality, that the job includes sleeping with the boss. The sexual dimension of the relationship is perhaps most cheekily shown when Johnny beats up one of Mundson’s henchmen in Mundson’s office. Mundson watches, his cane held between his legs, and as he likes what he sees the cane is raised to an erect angle. Before taking on a young protege, however, Mundson wants to make sure that Johnny is nice and malleable, that there is nothing in his past – maybe a woman, Mundson suggests – that will lead him astray. Johnny ensures that he is “no past and all future.”

\(^{40}\) Sinnerbrink 2012: 149. For another argument against the focus on narrative in the study of film, see Wright 2007: 21-22.

\(^{41}\) Pippin 2020: 172
Who knows, maybe he believes it himself?

But there was of course a past and there was of course a woman. And of course that woman will turn up. As Mundson returns from a trip, Johnny is startled to find that his boss/lover has brought back a a wife from his travels. (“Quite a surprise to hear a woman singing in my house, eh, Johnny?” Mundson says.) Keeping the surprises coming (“You’d think a bell would’ve rung or you’d think I’d have had some instinct of warning,” says Johnny in the voice-over), the wife is none other than Johnny’s ex, the titular Gilda (Rita Hayworth). For once a love triangle is actually triangular.

Some time passes. Mundson is unhappy that Germany has lost the war, Johnny works hard, and Gilda is finding out that life as Mundson’s wife is no picnic. As the characters act out instinct and their vicissitudes, we hear a lot about how much Johnny and Gilda hate each other, but how hate can be a very exciting emotion. “I hate you so much that I think I’m going to die from it,” whispers Gilda as they finally kiss. The kiss is seen by Mundson, who, as jilted husbands often do, reacts by faking his own death in a plane crash. (There is also a small matter of a murder Mundson has committed, but that is secondary.)

With their sugar daddy “dead,” Gilda thinks herself finally free, and she and Johnny get married. Before long, however, this new start is revealed to be little more than a repeat performance. Johnny’s hate has hardened, and, he decides, if Gilda was not true to Mundson when he was alive Johnny will see to it that she is now that he is dead. This culminates in the film’s most famous scene as Gilda performs a sexy song and dance number, “Put the Blame on Mame” (the lyrics to which, as many have noted, comments on the tendency, present here and in many noirs, to blame a woman for all that is wrong with the world as “Mame” get the blame for the New York blizzard of 1888 and the San Francisco earthquake 1906), and begins a striptease. After being pulled off the stage, she taunts Johnny: “Now they all know that the mighty Johnny Farrel got taken! And that he married a –” The sentence is interrupted as Johnny slaps her face.

During all this, there is a background plot concerning a worldwide monopoly on tungsten, of all things, that the main characters seem to be as uninterested in as the audience is. The detective (Joseph Calleia) tasked with thwarting this scheme has a thankless task in that as he tries to put pressure on the criminals they are to distracted too care. Confronting Johnny right after the “Put the Blame on Mame” scene, he spells out to him that the investigation is closing in and that Johnny has lost the game. Then, as if admitting to himself that his plot line is not the film’s A-story, he
changes his tone: “You didn’t hear a word of it, did you?” he says. “All you can think of is the way Gilda looked at you when you struck her. You two kids love each other pretty terribly, don’t you?”

“I hate her,” Johnny says quietly.

“That’s what I mean,” says the detective. “It’s the most curious love-hate pattern I’ve ever had the privilege of witnessing. As long as you’re as sick in the head as you are about her you’re not able to think about anything clearly.” Sick with love, a man loses his ability to reason. Detective Obregon, frustrated by this turn of events (“How dumb can a man be?” he at one point asks Johnny) takes it upon himself to, like a god brought out on the mechane at the end of a tragedy by Euripides, fix things for the romantic idiots. Johnny makes a deal to give up his tungsten cartel, and Obregon gives some wise words steering Johnny and Gilda back into each other’s arms with the plan that they are to return to America.

In a last twist, Mundson returns, comically minimizing the impact of his reappearance: “I didn’t intend to come back so soon, but I want my wife. You thought I died that night, didn’t you? I’d murdered a man and wanted simply to disappear for a while, that’s all.” Finding Gilda and Johnny together, Mundson decides to kill them. However, as he points his gun at the lovers, he is stabbed in the back by a bartender Gilda is friendly with. At this point, Obregon walks in, apparently to check if his matchmaking between Johnny and Gilda is working out. Johnny tries to take the blame for Mundson’s death, but the bartender will not let him. As they argue this point between them Obregon short-circuits the matter: “You two can quit being noble anytime you like, you know. Because a man can only die once and Mundson committed suicide three months ago.” This is the “poetic” ending of the film. Past and future, love and hate, and finally life and death have all been shown to be more fluid concepts than their ostensible status as opposites might have one believe. Giving some lip service to law and order, and probably appeasing the censors, Obregon adds in a more juridical register: “Besides, didn’t you ever hear of a thing called justifiable homicide?” This is of course true of Mundson’s death, but if Obregon really cared about that he would probably have taken more than a quick look around before determining this. He is simply happy to let Johnny and Gilda go off arm in arm.

Take The Woman on Pier 13 (aka I Married a Communist, 1950). We meet newlyweds Brad and Nan Collins (Robert Ryan and Laraine Day). We learn that they met only eight days ago when Nan
was hired to redecorate Brad’s offices. It is established that Brad is a model of self-sufficiency and does not want himself or his life redecorated. He is who he is, and repeatedly tells Nan that she “came along too late to change [him].” This strong sense of self is something Nan finds attractive, but when they first met this attitude naturally fomented some arguments with the new decorator, arguments that lead to a dinner date, and all of a sudden they were married. Brad is a man who decides what he wants in life and makes sure he gets it. He also has no interest whatsoever in the past. As Nan tries to start a conversation by pointing out to her husband that he knows nothing about her, he just moves in to kiss her. This, it seems, is all that is worth knowing.

As the couple is about to get some drinks in a restaurant a woman comes over and drops some not-too-subtle hints that she and Brad were once romantically involved. After she has left, Nan tries a small investigation:

NAN: How good were the good old days?
BRAD: Not so good, honey. Let’s forget them.
NAN: I will if you will.
BRAD: Good deal. As far as you and I are concerned, life began last Monday.

But life didn’t begin last Monday, and the past will not stay in the past. In his callow youth, Brad had been a member of the Communist Party, and that is not something one ever escapes: “The Party decides who is out and when,” he is soon told.

At the cusp of the 1950s, the hunt for suspected communist sympathizers in Hollywood was heating up, and many artists were famously blacklisted. The atmosphere of distrust in the business likely informed the paranoia on display in film noir. The business tycoon Howard Hughes who had taken over the production company RKO Pictures, is said to have used *The Woman on Pier 13* as a way to ween out reds in the company; those who refused to work on the project were subsequently fired.42 It was a film made with a clear agenda. Here, a remark that Thomas Doherty makes in relation to *Crossfire* (1947), a film that deals with American antisemitism, seems relevant. He notes how that film is a hybrid of two types of motion pictures that had become prominent after the end of the war, the film noir and the social problem film, resulting in a mutation where “one strain is all nerves, the other knows all the answers.”43 Given that well-meaning earnestness tends to

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42 See the interview with screenwriter Daniel Mainwaring in Porfirio, Silver & Ursini (eds.) 2002: 155
43 Doherty 2007: 225
age poorly, the noir element – all nerves and uncertainty – is the reason that the noir-stained social
problem films are the ones that hold up the best. Something of this nerve is also present in The
Woman on Pier 13. The communist organization in the film is of course unambiguously evil, and its
agents are portrayed as gangsters. Threats to the Party are expediently eliminated. But the way the
film focuses attention on the impossibility of freeing oneself from one’s past puts in question the
idealist subject of liberalism in ways that go beyond saying that communism is a threat to the
American way of life.

In the film, a man named Vanning (Thomas Gomez) comes to Brad’s office. He introduces
himself as a journalist, writing a piece on Brad’s rise from stevedore to vice president of a shipping
company (“What a wonderful advertisement for our American system of free enterprise”). Soon,
however, Vanning’s true intentions are revealed. Brad used to be Frank Johnson and worked as an
agitator and strongman for the Communist Party. He had suddenly disappeared, but as his new
career took off his picture in the paper has led to him being found again. Christine (Janis Carter),
the former girlfriend from the scene in the restaurant, is still in the Party. Brad tries to buy his way
out, but, Vanning tells him, this is not blackmail. Brad plays it tough – “I might have done business
with a blackmailer but not with a party agent” – but he is doomed.

Brad’s attempts to break free are all met with a response that sees him more unremittingly
ensnared. Meanwhile, Christine seduces Nan’s younger brother as a step in recruiting him to the
Party. As she actually falls for him, this is seen as a risk and they are both killed. Nan seeks to
avenge her brother but ends up getting captured. Brad manages to kill Vanning and his goons, but
not before getting a few bullets in him. As he lies dying in his wife’s arms he repeats his refrain
about how she came into his life too late.

What are we to take from these two examples? Recall from the introduction Imogen Sara Smith’s
claim that noir stories are “powered by the need to escape, but [...] structured around the
impossibility of escape.” The examples above revolve around people seeking to escape, and
believing that they can succeed. The male leads in particular, Johnny and Brad, voice pretensions to
unimpeded possibility. They have seen through machinations of power that keep the weak from
achieving greatness, taken charge of their fates, and make their own luck. During the course of the

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44 Smith 2011: 3
films they are humbled in these pretensions. It is a problem of beginnings and endings, the impossibility of cutting history in two, of breaking away from the past and starting anew. In *Gilda*, the protagonist couple gets a happy ending, but this is accomplished only by turning the detective investigating them into a *deus ex machina* figure. It takes only a moment’s reflection to judge this ending as insupposable and note that it does not resolve the problems the film sets up. Rather than being a weakness for the film, this adds to the theme of the chimerical status of true beginnings and endings. The mood of malaise is never truly alleviated.

2.1.2 *All the Ghosts That Broke My Heart Before I Met You*

Uncertainty and insecurity characterize the noir world and its inhabitants. Ambivalence and ambiguity reign, or they would if they were stable enough to do so. “Good and evil often rub shoulders to the point of merging into one another,” write Borde and Chaumeton concerning the moral aspect of film noir’s ambiguous terrain. Film noir is almost always about crime, and as an aspect of the moral ambiguity we might speak of a *legal* ambiguity. The criminals are often well-meaning and sympathetic, the police almost always rotten. There are twists and reversals that make the viewers as disoriented as the characters, wondering who to root for, and, frankly, what is going on in the story.

Even the distinction between life and death is rendered uncertain. Death and life rub shoulders to the point of merging into one another. In other words, the noir world is a world of ghosts. In support of this claim, let me turn to *Laura* (1944), one of the films that had its French premiere in the summer of 1946 and began the talk of film noir. It is a murder mystery, but as is often the case in film noir the whodunnit aspect of the mystery is largely unimportant and arbitrary. Film critic Roger Ebert calls the greatness of the film “a tribute to style over sanity.” He writes,

> Film noir is known for its convoluted plots and arbitrary twists, but even in a genre that gave us *The Maltese Falcon*, this takes some kind of prize. *Laura* has a detective who never goes to the station; a suspect who is invited to tag along as other suspects are interrogated; a heroine who is dead for most of the film; a man insanely jealous of a woman even though he never for a moment seems heterosexual; [...] and a murder weapon that is returned to its hiding place by the cop, who will “come by for it in the morning.”

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45 Borde & Chaumeton 2002: 12
46 Ebert 2002
In the tangled web of a plot I will here focus only on the three main characters. A woman, Laura Hunt (Gene Tierney), has been murdered in her apartment. She has been shot in the face with a shotgun. The film begins with detective Mark McPherson (Dana Andrews) going to visit one Waldo Lydecker (Clifton Webb), a columnist and radio personality. Lydecker – in one of the great character introductions in movie history – greets McPherson while in the bathtub, where he sits typing away on his typewriter.

Lydecker, a refined man with a sharp tongue and a mean wit, had been a kind of mentor figure for the young Laura, introducing her to New York high society and cultural elite. It is clear that he had a deep love for her, but not a sexual relationship since he is obviously gay.

“Obviously gay”? Well, yes and no. Richard Dyer makes an apposite point about “queer noir,” suggesting that the difficulty in determining with any certainty if a character is or is not gay, is not just the perennial difficulty of reading homosexuality back into past culture, but very much part of the mood, the noireness, of these films. One can explain the uncertainty in part by reference to censorship (one is not going to find explicit physical contact or verbal declaration in the period), but it is also of a piece with noir’s general uncertainty about how to decipher the world.37

In the case of Lydecker, his gayness is likely the product of the casting of Webb, for whom a believable portrayal of heterosexuality was a tall order. The effect is one that adds to film noir’s general sense of disorientation.

After answering the detective’s questions, Lydecker asks if he could tag along as McPherson continues his round of interrogations. Murder is his “favorite crime” and he would like to “study the reactions” of the suspects. McPherson notes that Lydecker himself is on the list of suspects, and Lydecker replies that it would be an insult if he was not. Lydecker is allowed to come along so we get an odd buddy cop dynamic as the men work their way through Laura’s socialite friends. The suspect (Lydecker) is now the detective. This is one example of how the roles of cop and criminal often appear to be interchangeable in the noir world. Indeed, more commonly in film noir the investigator will be a private detective and not a police officer, where the private eye tends to work in a gray area between legality and illegality.

But in Laura we get a cop, and an honest one. However, McPherson does have his damage. And as the story unfolds we see that hearing Lydecker talk about Laura has rubbed off on

47 Dyer 2002: 90
McPherson. Midway through the film, he goes to Laura’s apartment in the night. He looks at her painted portrait. He goes through her things. He reads her letters. He smells her perfume. He drinks her booze. It is a love scene between McPherson and Laura’s ghost (and here David Raksin’s elegiac and romantic music score adds a lot).

Lydecker, who apparently was in the neighborhood, stops by, having seen that the lights were on. He, we have learned, knows more than a little about what it is like to be obsessed with Laura, and he confronts McPherson:

McPherson, did it ever strike you that you’re acting very strangely? It’s a wonder you don’t come here like a suitor, with roses and a box of candy – drugstore candy, of course. Have you ever dreamed of Laura as your wife, by your side at the policeman’s ball, or in the bleachers, or listening to the heroic story of how you got a silver shinbone from a gun battle with a gangster? I see you have. [...] You better watch out, McPherson, or you’ll end up in a psychiatric ward. I don’t think they’ve ever had a patient who fell in love with a corpse.

Lydecker might be underestimating the regularity with which people fall in love with corpses, but he is not wrong about McPherson.

Having sent Lydecker on his way, McPherson keeps on drinking and finally falls asleep in a chair in front of Laura’s portrait on the wall. He is awakened in the morning when someone has come into the apartment. It is Laura that has come home. And again we get a role reversal when it comes to legal questions. Laura upon her return from dead goes from being the victim to becoming a suspect. Why was there a dead woman in her apartment and where has she been the last couple of days?

I will return to Laura soon, but let me first widen the scope for a bit. The role of law in the noir world also shows another sense of ambiguity. Right and wrong are not stable designations. The dark city is no place for the classic hero, but equally not for the classic villain. An interesting example here is The Racket (1951). Here we do get a black-and-white tale of Good Cop vs. Bad Gangster, and some commentators have protested that this could not possibly count as film noir. What is interesting, however, and very noir, is how these two are clearly considered by their surroundings to be vestiges from a bygone era and are now seen as inconvenient in a new, more pragmatic age. Robert Mitchum’s righteous police detective is moved from precinct to precinct, further and further away from the action so as to not be in a position to interfere with the corrupt politics of the ruling
classes. Robert Ryan’s gangster is viewed with equal suspicion by his colleagues in crime, who fear that his violent temper might draw unwanted attention to their organization and disrupt the comfortable set-up they have.

Given that crime is almost a plot point in noir one is invited to consider its depiction of law. In film noir law has become ambiguous, and no values are stable or unequivocal. In the dark city’s dark nights it is hard to tell the good guys and the bad guys apart. We get, as Pippin puts it in his book on film noir, a vision of a “postlaw world of disillusionment.” In this, something must be added regarding the logic of “post-”ness. What is “post-” isn't really “post-.” The past will not let go. In the famous words of William Faulkner, that everyone writing on film noir seems to quote (including Pippin, and now myself), “The past is never dead. It isn’t even past.” This is the way that law figures in film noir. While law no longer is convincing to noir denizens they have not actually moved beyond it. Law is still the guiding structure for making sense of things, but this structure itself does not make sense. One can compare this to Nietzsche’s thought on nihilism; reason has proved unable to secure a meaning for human existence, and while this does not mean that existence is meaningless the faith we still have in reason makes impossible any other model for justification. God is dead, but we still have to kill God’s shadow, Nietzsche says. The long dark shadows so typical of film noir’s visual style is the shadow of law. If it was truly postlaw, completely over it, it would not be so disillusioned. The disillusionment stems from the fact that the law that is no longer believed in still governs life.

Quote-worthy in this context is the philosopher Simon Critchley’s work on Greek tragedy, a genre which he says confronts us with “the sometimes terrifying presence of the past that we might seek to disavow but which will have its victory in the end, if only in the form of our mortality.” Tragedy, he continues, “provokes what snags in our being, the snares and booby traps of the past that we blindly trip over in our relentless, stumbling, forward movement.” I think much of what Critchley says about tragedy goes likewise for film noir.

The lack of control over the past takes on another dimension when that past cannot be remembered. Considering the motif of blackout drinking in film noir, Jake Hinkson notes two functions of these plots. First, it sets up a mystery, but second, and more important, is the thematic

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48 Pippin 2012: 10
49 Nietzsche 2001: §108
50 Critchley 2019: 3
function: “Because the protagonist doesn’t know what he’s done (or hasn’t done), the mystery is one of fraught self-discovery. Not only can’t he trust the world around him, he can’t even trust himself. And isn’t that what noir is all about?” The same can be said for amnesia plots in general, and the thematic suitability goes some way to explain the overuse of these plots in noir.

These generalizations are of course not valid for all films of the genre. For a character created by Mickey Spillane, the most macho of the authors of hard-boiled fiction, even amnesia can be seen as a sign of complete control. Thus, in The Long Wait (1954) the main character states, “Losing your memory makes your mind work sharper. Now the average person remembers things, but half the time he remembers wrong. A guy with amnesia has nothing to fog his mind. He’s got nothing to remember. So he makes deductions, like a detective.” Handsome words. Some people have an aptitude for turning a problem into an opportunity, but these are the outliers in film noir, where most protagonists are more gifted at snatching disaster from the jaws of triumph.

As the song says, we walk with ghosts, pleading with them not to insist. But insistence is a ghost’s mode of existence. It will not let go. It cannot rest. And ghosts invade our identities so that we can not free ourselves from them and so find ourselves mired in something sticky and frustrating. This mood of unrest is what I have called malaise, and it is characterized by an urge for escape that cannot be accomplished. The self is caught in a violent impingement that seems to divide it against itself. As a character in The Dark Corner (1946) nicely puts it, “I feel all dead inside. I’m backed up in a dark corner and I don’t know who’s hitting me.” The Dark Corner is a film starring Clifton Webb about a man in love with the painting of a woman, which reminds me that I was not done talking about Laura.

What have we learned so far, and who was the killer? Crime and time, such is film noir’s reason and rhyme. Laws are broken (in all senses of the word), and time is out of joint. In Laura’s apartment, there is a clock. It is a beautiful grandfather clock. There are two such clocks in existence we are told, one Laura’s and one Lydecker’s. For Lydecker, they are a symbol for him and Laura being two of a kind. And it is in a secret compartment inside the clock he hides the shotgun he used to kill who he thought was Laura when he feared Laura was becoming independent and outgrowing the role he had created for her. Lydecker misrecognizes his intended victim and kills the wrong person.

51 Hinkson 2019: 24-25
When Laura returns, and is still clearly intent on breaking free from Lydecker’s influence, he goes back for the weapon and is about to kill her when McPherson arrives in the nick of time to shoot him dead.

As is often the case in film noir, Laura uses a flashback structure and voice-over narration. In Laura, the narrator is Lydecker. And there are two levels of narration. Mostly, he is talking to McPherson when they are out investigating together, and we get to see in flashback the events he recalls. But there is also a prologue that begins the film that one must in the end conclude was spoken by Lydecker after his death. With this as a prologue, the whole film that follows is a story told by a ghost, which is the perfect narrative gimmick for the film. Lydecker is dead, but even that does not help him reconcile with his mortality. Displacing and misrecognizing it again, he speaks from the beyond, in the great opening line of the movie, “I shall never forget the weekend Laura died.”

The spectral presence of death permeates the noir world, and it is tangled up with a strange eroticism. A quick way to demonstrate this is to list titles such as Murder, My Sweet (1944), Kiss Me Deadly (1955), and Kiss the Blood Off My Hands (1948). Laura is no exception and gives an interesting vision of desire and gender as seen through a mirror deadly.

Perhaps the archetypal noir character is the femme fatale, the seductive bad woman who will lead the ill-fated man to his death (and even if the man knows this he still cannot resist her). When Simone de Beauvoir writes in The Second Sex (originally published in 1949), “The woman who makes free use of her attractiveness – adventuress, vamp, femme fatale – remains a disquieting type. The image of Circe survives in the bad woman of the Hollywood film,” she might have in mind Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) from Double Indemnity (1944) and Kathie Moffat (Jane Greer) from Out of the Past (1947), to name but two of the most famous noir femme fatales.

Beauvoir’s analysis, in the section of her book called “Myths,” works well in relation to film noir. She writes that women are forced into duplicitousness by the double and contradictory demand placed on them by men, to be both his property and to remain foreign to him, both “servant and sorceress,” or as we say today, a lady in the streets but a freak in the sheets. Beauvoir writes: “Deceitful, elusive, unintelligible, double-dealing – thus it is that she best lends herself to the

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52 Beauvoir 1956: 205
contradictory desires of man.”53 And again:

They did invent her. But she exists also apart from their inventiveness. And hence she is not only the incarnation of their dream, but also its frustration. There is no figurative image of woman which does not call up at once its opposite: she is Life and Death, Nature and Artifice, Daylight and Night. Under whatever aspect we consider her, we always find the same shifting back and forth.54

Film noir’s femme fatales fit this description, but with this being the case it is perhaps a given that there is also an oscillation in the viewer’s reaction to them. Whatever else the femme fatale is, she is fascinating.

Laura (the character), however, is not a femme fatale. And there is a clue from the start that she is not: she has a job. She works at an advertising agency. One story that gets told (or at least used to get told) about film noir is that all the duplicitous women in them came as a response to men feeling uneasy with women having joined the workforce during the war, and not being about to quit working when the men came home. As some theorists have pointed out, while there certainly were such feelings around in American society at the time, that does not seem to be what is going on in film noir. If a woman has a job, that is a good sign that she is not going to kill anybody to get money. Generally in these films, women kill for money, and men kill for a woman. It is the woman who does not want to work that is likely to be bad news.

A final word on Beauvoir’s account of the contradictory nature of heterosexual male desire, that a woman is to be his and still remain foreign: For Lydecker, the only way he can preserve his love for Laura is to kill her. That is certainly one way to fulfill that contradictory demand. And McPherson of course falls in love with Laura when he thinks she is dead.

The classic literary example here is of course Hamlet, and the way he treats Ophelia. At the beginning of that play, Hamlet dumps Ophelia and then goes on to call her a whore, “get thee to a nunnery,” and so on. To top things off he kills her dad, sending her into madness, where finally she kills herself. Then, at her funeral, Hamlet jumps into the grave, boasting that he would drink vinegar and eat a crocodile for her. Only when Ophelia is dead can Hamlet love her.

McPherson and Laura do get together in the end. Will the fact that she is alive be to the detriment of their relationship? Lydecker tells Laura precisely this, “When you were unattainable,
when he thought you were dead, that’s when he wanted you most.” Laura brushes this aside: “But he was glad when I came back. As if he were waiting for me.” We hope she is right.

2.2 New Takes on Original Sin

Death, lust, confusion, self-interest, wretchedness: the thematic overlap between film noir and the Christian doctrine of original sin is obvious enough. How the doctrine is to be understood (and if it can be found in the Bible) is a matter of dispute. My, truly minimal, contribution to the discussion is to set up the possibility for a dialogue between the doctrine and film noir. I will in this part of the essay consider elements from the work of Martin Luther, Christopher Deacy, and Stephen Mulhall that, I hope to show, might be stimulating in this regard.

2.2.1 Luther’s Magnification of Sin

The question of original sin was one of the points where Martin Luther let his distaste for the Scholasticism of his time be known. As Martin Heidegger notes in a 1924 lecture on the problem of sin in Luther, the fundamental tendency in Luther’s theology is that “the corruptio of the being of man can never be grasped radically enough.”55 I limit myself here to Luther’s commentary on Genesis, which he worked on from 1535 to 1545 (he died in February 1546, three months after the work’s completion), and particularly Genesis 3, the biblical story of the Fall.

What Luther reacted against among the Scholastics was that they, he thought, sought to extenuate or minimize the importance of original sin. Instead, he argued, sin’s importance should be amplified and magnified:

This multiform corruption of nature therefore ought not only not to be extenuated, but to be as much as possible magnified. It ought to be shown that man is not only fallen from the image of God, from the knowledge of God, from the knowledge of all other creatures, and from all the dignity and glory of his nakedness, into ignorance of God, into blasphemies against God, and into hatred and contempt of God; but that he is fallen even into enmity against God; to say nothing at the present time of that tyranny of Satan to which our nature has by sin made itself the basest slave. These things, I say, are not to be extenuated, but to be magnified by every possible description of them; because if the magnitude of our disease be not fully known, we shall never know nor desire the remedy. Moreover the more you

55 Heidegger 2002: 106
extenuate sin, the less you make grace to be valued.\textsuperscript{56}

For Luther, a magnification of the evil of sin was necessary in order to make us “deplore this our fallen state and cry and sigh unto Christ our great Physician.”\textsuperscript{57}

Given the unremittingness with which film noir depicts existence as defined by confusion, self-interest, and sexual obsession – a direct opposite to the state of original righteousness with perfect reason, perfect will, and (maybe most importantly for Luther) that Adam and Eve were naked and not ashamed, without it exciting any “polluted lust” – might one, looking through a theological lens, take film noir to be performing an amplification or magnification of our sinfulness? I think so.

The part of Luther’s commentary that is most interesting for a dialogue with film noir concerns Genesis 3:8, where the man and woman, after having disobeyed God’s command and eaten of the forbidden fruit, hear God coming and seek to flee and hide among the trees of the Garden. What this shows, Luther writes, is how sin results in a flight from and hatred of God:

For it is not the devil from whom Adam and Eve are now fleeing. They are rushing from the sight of God their Creator, whose presence is now more dreadful and intolerable to them than that of Satan; Satan is now more congenial to their feelings than the adorable God; for from Satan they flee not, nor are filled with his dread. This dread therefore, is actually a flight from and a hatred of God himself.\textsuperscript{58}

Given what has been said about the motifs in noir of desperate escape and paranoia, the thematic overlap is clear. Luther notes the extreme folly in trying to escape God, but, he says, this is the nature of all sin: “it causes us to attempt to flee from the wrath of God, from which wrath we find it impossible to flee.”\textsuperscript{59} Expanding on this, a little later in the account, he writes,

such is the nature of sin, that unless God bring the medicine immediately after it is committed and call back the sinner to himself, he will flee from his God farther and farther, and by mendaciously excusing his sin he will add sin to sin until he runs at length into blasphemy and despair. Thus sin draws after it by its own weight as it were sin upon sin, and causes eternal ruin, until the sinner finally will rather accuse God himself than acknowledge his own sin.\textsuperscript{60}

Sin, by its own weight, draws after it more and more sin, and for a sinful human there is nothing in

\textsuperscript{56} Luther 2015: Ch. 3, Pt. 1, V. 1a
\textsuperscript{57} Luther 2015: Ch. 3, Pt. 1, V. 1a
\textsuperscript{58} Luther 2015: Ch. 3, Pt. 3, V. 8
\textsuperscript{59} Luther 2015: Ch. 3, Pt. 3, V. 9
\textsuperscript{60} Luther 2015: Ch. 3, Pt. 3, V. 10
their power that can break this chain, since all man’s powers are corrupted and any attempt to break
with sin will come from sin and accumulate more sin. The structure here mirrors what I have called
the problem of beginnings and endings in film noir.

2.2.2 Deacy’s Noir of Redemption

Christopher Deacy’s *Screen Christologies* (2001) was a fairly early entry in the Religion and Film
upswing. On Deacy’s account, Christianity and film noir share an obsession with sin. Deacy takes
a functionalist approach to religion and his basic claim is that certain noir protagonists can be seen
as “redeemer-figures,” performing for a film audience a function analogous to Christ’s function for
the Christian. Thus, it is an instance of what Solano will somewhat disparagingly call the “spot-the-
Christ-figure” approach, but a fairly interesting one.

Deacy begins by addressing a tendency in film criticism to talk about redemption as
synonymous with a story having a happy ending. This, he argues, is to miss the point. A clean-cut
happy ending, where all problems are solved without remainder, is escapist rather than redemptive
in its orientation, thus leading the audience away from a confrontation with sin. Whatever
redemption is, it is not simply escapism and a forgetting or ignoring of the malaise of existence. It
requires a full and thorough confrontation with that existence. Film noir, for Deacy, is a site for
such a confrontation. His claim is that while the world of noir films may be “intrinsically fatalistic
and hopeless,” there is still a possibility that audiences in engaging with such oppressive images and
narratives “can come to experience the antithesis of a helpless and impotent response to such
films.” There is here something of what I suggested in the discussion of Luther, that noir can be
said to confront its audience with a magnified image of our sinful orientation in a way that makes
them – us – deplore this fallen state. As Deacy puts it, “redemption can be seen to function in spite
of its apparent absence, since it emanates from one’s ability to confront and come to terms with the
intrinsically volatile and fragmentary nature of human existence, rather than in the form of an
escape from it.”

However, while describing human existence as intrinsically volatile and fragmentary,

61 Deacy 2009: 364
62 Solano 2022: 5, 30
63 Deacy 2001: 58
64 Deacy 2001: 64
Deacy holds that human beings can effectuate their own redemption, and do this by human means. For Luther, of course, the only way to redemption was through Christ. Deacy finds this exclusivity thesis untenable.

For Deacy, it is the “everyman” quality of the typical noir protagonist that makes him (Deacy deals exclusively with male protagonists in this regard) such an interesting candidate as a possible redeemer-figure, especially in the depiction of this redeemer’s own need to be redeemed. Thus, Deacy argues, film noir can be a site of redemptive activity in ways analogous to Christianity:

the human attainment of redemption is able to operate on a human level and, due to the “everyman” status of the noir protagonist, does not require audiences to take on board the baggage of a specific religious tradition, to which they may not subscribe, or phenomena they do not accept as real, in our predominantly scientific and secularized society. Indeed, it is the noir protagonist’s intrinsic feasibility and authenticity, even when – or, perhaps, especially when – that entails the delineation of human existence lived out at its most subhuman, at its most brutal, oppressive and capricious, that makes a redemptive reading so pertinent.65

While still speaking of original sin, Deacy takes what we saw Luther call an “extenuating” position on the question. Choosing Irenaeus and Pelagius over Augustine, he endorses the view that human nature is still sound and whole even after the Fall. What was lost was not natural human capacities, but supernatural gifts meant to aid humanity in achieving their purpose of participating in the life of God.66 Luther, of course, thought that the doctrine that human nature had not been corrupted should be “shunned as a deadly poison.”67 But if human nature is sufficient to by itself, the role of a redeemer-figure if to reveal the fully human:

in order for a film protagonist to be apprehended by audiences as a model or exemplar of redemptive possibility, such a figure must, in the spirit of the Antiochene Christological formulation, be a completely and authentically human individual, who, in contradistinction to Hollywood’s propensity towards escapism, reflects and embodies the ambiguities and vicissitudes of human existence.68

Such protagonists, Deacy claims, can be found in film noir.

65 Deacy 2001: 102
66 Deacy 2001: 70-76
67 Luther 2015: Ch. 3, Pt. 2, V. 7
68 Deacy 2001: 134
2.2.3 Mulhall’s Perversity

If film noir is about a desperate need for an impossible escape from one’s existence as a temporal being, then Mulhall would nod in agreement: “nothing is more human than the desire to deny the human, to interpret limits as limitations, and to repudiate the human condition of conditionedness (finitude) in the name of the unconditioned, the transcendent, the superhuman – the inhuman.” 69 It is an inflection of the both damaging and ineradicable human craving to be God.

Following the distinction found in Luther, one can say that whereas Deacy, inspired by post-Enlightenment developments in theology, takes an extenuating view on original sin, in Mulhall we find again a magnifying approach. If the doctrine is offensive to the post-Enlightenment’s conception of us as rational, autonomous beings, then so much worse for the post-Enlightenment. If a sinful orientation is part and parcel of what it is to be human, then any human effort to alter this orientation will – because of that orientation – be distorted and in vain. Thus, it is not within man’s power to facilitate their own redemption. 70

One connection between the original sin doctrine and film noir is the way they put into question man’s rational agency. In this regard, Pippin notes how film noir poses a problem for the account of how narratives work defended by David Bordwell, one of the leading figures of the analytic-cognitivist approach to the philosophy of film (see Chapter 1.2.2). For Bordwell, Pippin writes, classic Hollywood narratives always presuppose a philosophical view of persons as “individual centers of causal agency reflectively aware of problems to be solved and why they need to be solved.” 71 Pippin’s Fatalism in American Film Noir (2012) explores the ways in which this assumption is put into question in many film noirs. This passage comes close to saying the same thing that Mulhall says with regard to the offensiveness of the doctrine of original sin for any morality that has autonomy at its center, as the doctrine stands in direct opposition to “the liberal understanding of human beings as the self-originating sources of moral value (as Rawls puts his Kantian conception of the matter). For the Christian, we are, if anything, the self-originating source of sin; hence, our only hope of regaining any contact with goodness is by dying to ourselves.” 72

69 Mulhall 2005: 94
70 Mulhall 2005: 10
71 Pippin 2012: 107n3
72 Mulhall 2005: 7. We might also here recall Iris Murdoch’s remark about the Kantian subject: “Kant’s man had already received a glorious incarnation nearly a century earlier in the work of Milton: his proper name is Lucifer” (Murdoch 2014: 78).

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Questions of agency will be central to my interpretation of *Criss Cross* (1949) in Part 3.

The most interesting parts of Mulhall’s 2005 book *Philosophical Myths of the Fall*, his most sustained meditation on original sin, are the nuanced and perceptive readings of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein. This is not the place to go through these readings, but Mulhall’s claim is that these thinkers, while denying the doctrine of original sin, end up reproducing it in different ways. I quote from Mulhall’s conclusions:

> these thinkers are not only prepared to take seriously, but are in various ways forced to endorse, a conception of the human as structurally perverse beyond any full accounting, our desires and self-interpretations systematically turned against themselves and away from the truth of our nature and of our world. As a consequence, they necessarily take their readers to the limits of a wholly secular, Enlightened conception of the human creature and its place in the universe – compelling our thinking to the point at which it threatens to subvert our sense of the self-sufficiency of its bases.\(^\text{73}\)

Again, this is not the place to consider the validity of Mulhall’s readings, but we can ask what accepting his claim might mean. Mulhall himself provides two alternatives. Firstly, and at the very least, he says, it suggests that it might be more difficult than some seem to think “to construct successfully a conception of the human condition that genuinely transcends the Christian theological horizon within which Western culture has developed.”\(^\text{74}\)

The second alternative is bolder:

> But it might also give us reason to take seriously the possibility that any sufficiently rigorous attempt to give an account of the human mode of being will find itself recurring to (even reiterating) the core tenets of Christianity precisely because those tenets are genuinely responsive to something deep and determining in human nature.\(^\text{75}\)

For Mulhall, a subversion of our sense of self-sufficiency is necessary if Christianity shall at all appear as a “viable, humanly inhabitable, intellectual and moral stance.”\(^\text{76}\)

This magnification of original sin, no doubt, is a provocative claim, for many Christians and non-Christians alike. How one reacts to it will likely depend to some extent on one’s prior experiences and cultural familiarity with the doctrine. Elizabeth S. Goodstein, in her review, writes that, while there is much that is of interest in Mulhall’s book, its argument is also highly

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\(^\text{73}\) Mulhall 2005: 123
\(^\text{74}\) Mulhall 2005: 120-121
\(^\text{75}\) Murdoch 2005: 121
\(^\text{76}\) Mulhall 2005: 124
problematic: “Those of us who are mindful of the transgressions committed against humanity in the name of the doctrines he regards as ‘genuinely responsive to something deep and determining in human nature’ must take his arguments with more than a grain of salt.” While not wishing to be blithe with regard to transgressions committed against humanity, for a reader already taking the doctrines in question with much more than a grain of salt, Mulhall’s considerations may be a welcome potato.

2.2.4 Discussion

The urge to escape that is the driving force in noir stories is, following the distinction made by Deacy, an urge toward redemption rather than escapism. But where Deacy acknowledges, indeed stresses, the difficulty of such redemption, I, following Smith, go further and say that, from a noir perspective, this redemptive escape is impossible.

Mulhall, as I have said, argues that certain atheist philosophers can be seen as in their work repeating an originally Christian understanding of the human mode of existence as inherently sinful and in need of redemption. But this detachment and reconstruction, Mulhall writes, presents problems:

For its constraints are such that it is destined to leave us with a conception of the human condition that is substantially more bleak than the Christian conception from which it aims to turn away. By retaining the idea of human perversity as structural and rejecting any divine means of overcoming it, we are left with merely human sources of therapeutic or emancipatory help; and if these are indeed conceptualized as merely human, and hence as available to us only from within the condition of mysterious perversity to which they aim to respond, then they can hold out no hope of overcoming that condition. At best, they can provide us with an understanding of its inherent perversity, and a way or ways of attempting to bear up under its burden.

In its perversity, human existence cries out for escape from itself, whether or not this appeal has any hope of succeeding. This, I think, is also what we see in the world of film noir.

This is bleak, but it need not be a call for resignation. One thinks of Theodor Adorno at the end of *Minima Moralia*, noting that while redemption is impossible, it is only from a standpoint of redemption that philosophy can be responsibly practiced in the face of despair. This, writes

77 Goodstein 2006
78 Mulhall 2005: 121
Adorno, is an

utterly impossible thing, because it presupposes a standpoint removed, even though by a hair's breadth, from the scope of existence, whereas we well know that any possible knowledge must not only be first wrested from what is, if it shall hold good, but is also marked, for this very reason, by the same distortion and indigence which it seeks to escape.\textsuperscript{79}

However, he goes on, “beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters.”\textsuperscript{80}

\textsuperscript{79} Adorno 2005: 153
\textsuperscript{80} Adorno 2005: 153
3. FATE AND DECEPTION IN CRISS CROSS

A strong case could be made for Robert Siodmak being the preeminent director of film noir, and *Criss Cross* (1949) is arguably his greatest work. It was not very successful at its time of release, but, championed by people like Eddie Muller, its star has risen and it is now heralded as one of the great films of the genre.

“When you double-cross a double-crosser, it’s a *Criss Cross,*” says the poster. As we follow the stations of this criss cross the film delivers on this promise of a tale of multi-layered deception, in a way that invites one to consider the limitations of agency in a situation almost devoid of markers on certitude to guide one’s orientation.

3.1 FROM THE START

*Criss Cross* opens with an aerial shot over Los Angeles. It is night in the big city. The film critic David Thompson in a piece on the film, writes that Miklos Rosza’s music score seems to carry a “death sentence,” sending us down to the ground, more particularly a parking lot. A car drives in, but stops and backs out again – the first interrupted action in a film full of them – revealing a man and a woman embracing, hiding their faces until the car is gone.

“Steve, I had to see you,” says the woman, Anna (Yvonne De Carlo).

Steve (Burt Lancaster) is anxious: “He’ll get wise. The last minute, you’ll ruin everything.”

We know very little of what is going on, but immediately a tone is established of a world of secrecy and deception, lust and danger. As Thomson nicely puts it, “we are plunged into their haste and panic, and left to struggle with the clash of her satin gown and his sporty jacket.”

“If it was only all over now. If it was only this time tomorrow,” Anna says. After whatever is about to happen the next day – something that apparently might get Steve hurt – Anna is supposed to go to a cottage in Palos Verdes and lie low for a few weeks before Steve can join her. Then it will

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81 Thompson 1990: 16. Thompson is also the surname of the main character in the film, who I, to avoid misunderstanding, will refer to only by his first name, Steve.

82 Thompson 1990: 16
be finished. Then they can start over. Anna recites a version of the characteristic dream of a new beginning that I discussed in Part 2:

All those things that happened to us, everything that went before, we'll forget it. You'll see. I'll make you forget it. After it's done, after it's all over and we're safe, it'll be just you and me. You and me, the way it should've been all along from the start.

Yvonne De Carlo, in one of the finest close-ups cinema history has to offer, delivers these words almost directly into the camera. Eddie Muller says of this scene and her plea that it “might be noir’s defining moment,” and I am inclined to agree.83

As Anna re-enters the club we meet her husband, Slim Dundee (Dan Duryea, affectionately known as “the heel with sex appeal” and doing one in a long series of smarmy heels he played in film noir), a gangster. Slim is throwing a farewell party before the couple is to travel to Detroit the following day. He is suspicious (rightly so) of why Anna was out in the parking lot. A sense of antagonism marks their interaction.

Having waited long enough for it to not be obvious that he was with Anna in the parking lot, Steve barges into the club, a “swell-looking, well-built man” (as another character later notes) looking for a fight. As he passes the bar, his stride is interrupted by a customer: “Why don't you go outside, Steve, and find some other place down the street?”

“What’s the matter with this place, Lieutenant?” Steve snarls back.

“Pete. The name is Pete. I’m your friend, believe me. You know what’s the matter with this place.” This introduction quickly establishes Pete as someone whose attempts to keep Steve from self-destruction are beginning to strain the friendship. We also begin to suspect that there is something compulsive about Steve’s love for Anna. Unresponsive to Pete's plea, Steve moves ahead. As the bartender and a regular (known in the credits simply as “the lush”) asks Pete if he is not going to intervene to prevent the guaranteed fight, Pete sourly responds that he does not care anymore. This attitude of not caring is quickly erased as the maître d’ gives him a whisper that Slim has a knife and that this could be the opportunity to arrest him that Pete has been waiting for.

As Pete bursts through the door into the room where Slim is serving the farewell party dinner the knife lands at his feet, Slim is being helped up from the floor and Steve is backing up. Pete is unsurprisingly stonewalled as he tries to find out what happened. Steve insists that it’s a

83 Muller [year unknown]
private matter between himself and Slim. Pete calls him a chump and leaves with a sense of annoyance that he allowed himself to think that he was actually going to accomplish something.

Pete is left in the dark, and as we see the aftermath of the kerfuffle we realize that he is not alone in wondering, but for quite different reasons. As Slim and his henchmen gather in a back alley that for some reason also doubles as a washroom, the henchmen are baffled as to what has happened: “What happened? He didn’t come down here tonight to have a fight, a real fight. It was supposed to be a phony, strictly for the cop’s benefit. What went wrong? Why did you have to go and pull a knife, Slim?”

Unveiling yet another level of deception, Steve and Slim are in cahoots and the event the next day alluded to earlier is a robbery of an armored car from the company where Steve works. A sum of six figures is expected. The fanfare about the Detroit trip, as well as Steve stopping by all pugnacious, were deceptions meant to fool the police, particularly Pete. But Slim Dundee’s suspicions regarding Steve and Anna makes him see red. What was planned, in order to throw the law off their scent, to look like a “heat of the moment” altercation between romantic rivals turns, in the heat of the moment, into an actual altercation, already hinting at themes of planned, intentional actions as distinct from spur of the moment, thoughtless actions, or reactions, that will play a significant role in the film. All in all, it is an eventful first ten minutes of the film.

The following morning, Steve is driving the armored truck. With him is “Pop,” a sweet old man and a friend of Steve’s mother. In accordance with the plan, a third guy supposed to be on the job, was called away on an emergency just before they got in the car. It is a forty minute drive to get to where they are going, and we go into Steve’s inner monologue, heard in voice-over, and a forty minute flashback, before and after which Steve checks his watch, indicating that what we have seen is what he has thought over that time. And he thinks about Anna.

### 3.2 On the Nature of Fate

The flashback takes us back in time eight months, with Steve returning to Los Angeles after having travelled around the country, working odd jobs here and there, all in an attempt to get “her” out of his system. Convinced that he has done this, he is ready to come home and move into the house of
his aging mother as his younger brother is looking to get married and move out. But fate, he says in the voice-over, had other plans.

Flashback structures and voice-over narration are common, even archetypal, in film noir. So is the theme of fate. Indeed, the narrative techniques often serve to heighten the sense of fatalism as (usually) a man tells the story of how whatever criminal endeavor he set out to accomplish has ended horribly and he tries to explain himself, often with an air of “If I knew then what I know now...” (and sometimes “I did know even then how stupid it was, but I did it anyway”) which adds to the feeling that the events were beyond his rational control.

Robert Pippin, in his *Fatalism in American Film Noir* (2012), takes up this theme in a philosophical register and investigates the challenges film noir poses for fields of philosophy of action and agency. As Pippin notes, if one looks at the narrator’s place in the story, he often has a stake in playing up the fatalistic aspects of the story so as to avoid accountability for what has happened.84 Thompson, in his piece on *Criss Cross*, states clearly an interpretation along these lines: “the voiceover in this film noir is stupid, for Steve doesn’t get the point. It was never fate, it was him.”85 One might also think here of Luther’s remarks on Genesis 3:12, where Adam tells God how the woman God had placed with him gave him to eat of the fruit. Luther reads this as Adam putting the blame on God for placing the woman with him. This, Luther says, is sin’s last step: to reproach God and make Him the author of sin. “Learn then from this solemn history,” Luther writes, “that perverseness and folly ever accompany sin, that transgressors by all their excuses only accuse themselves, and that the more they defend the more betray themselves, especially before God!”86

While I certainly agree with Thompson that Steve’s stupidity – his folly – is a quite striking element in the film, I think things are somewhat more complex. A first thing to note is that as Steve’s voice-over kicks in he is on his way to pulling off a heist, and to in this situation steel one’s nerves by convincing oneself that one is not really responsible is not a stupid strategy. But this is still not the whole story. As Pippin puts it, “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

84 Pippin 2012: 20
85 Thompson 1990: 19
86 Luther 2015: Ch. 3, Pt. 3, V. 12
a willful evasion of a responsibility one clearly bears.”

Such is the double bind, and Pippin goes on to note that there are moral dangers both in an exaggerated sense of our capacity for self-initiated action and in the inverse self-undermining throwing one’s hand up and bemoaning the all-pervasive power of fate, and that to navigate a path between these two is easy to say but hard to do. “Many of the best noirs,” he writes, “are quite good at conveying to us the sense that this, this complicated and paradoxical situation, is what could more properly be said to be our modern fate.”

To speak, as Pippin here does, of a “modern fate” is to enter into some long-standing debates in the history of ideas, and we must back up and consider the nature of fate. Pippin notes that notions of fate might first be thought to apply only under certain religious assumptions, as in the case of ancient Greek epics and tragedies, where the gods determine the outcome with little regard for what human beings plan and do. The force of fate as invoked in film noir does not usually have this character. Pippin proposes a “capacious” understanding of the notion of fate, “as what in general makes the presumption of rational control over one’s future naïve,” thus including things like blind luck or chance.

We can here also ponder again Simon Critchley’s work on Greek tragedy, where he claims that if one reads the 31 extant plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides one arrives at a much less exotic image of the ancients than the one some philosophers have painted. “The presence of the gods, fate, or supernatural forces in Attic tragedy, like ghosts, need not scare us,” he writes. “The meaning of the gods is a way of naming those aspects of possible experience – forces, structures, circumstances, or just the weight of the past – that lie outside of individual control and that can destroy those individuals.” Critchley also says, using Oedipus as his example, that fate in these plays must be understood not as something that necessitates a certain outcome, but as something that needs us to conspire with it for it to have its effect. We bring fate down upon ourselves. Oedipus knew his curse, that he would kill his father. “One might have thought,” Critchley says, “that, given the awful news from the oracle, and given his uncertainty about the identity of his father (Oedipus is called a bastard by a drunk at a banquet in Corinth, which is what first infects his

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87 Pippin 2012: 49
88 Pippin 2012: 97
89 There are some exceptions to this, such as City That Never Sleeps (1953) where the city itself, which also narrates the film in a booming, god-like voice, seems to have plans for its citizens that it will see realized.
90 Pippin 2012: 16
91 Critchley 2019: 68
mind with doubt), he might have exercised caution before deciding to kill an older man who seems to have resembled him.”

92 Tragedy requires our collusion with fate. For this reason, Critchley writes, “One reason to study tragedy is to see precisely about how in acting, we are acted upon, and how that being acted upon can and does convert to a certain action that takes place in our own name.”

93 As I have already said, I think much of what Critchley says about tragedy also applies film noir.

With this, we return to *Criss Cross* and consider Steve’s account. Upon his return home, we see a series of interrupted actions. As he gets to the house his mother and brother are out and he does not have a key. He goes to the drugstore to borrow the phone to call his friend Pete the cop, but, by fate, this is the day when Pete has had to work the day shift. Having struck out twice, he heads over to the Round-Up, the bar seen at the beginning of the film. “There I was, all right, looking for her, whether I felt like admitting it to myself or not,” Steve narrates. This had been their chosen haunt. Steve notes how different the place looks in the daytime, almost ghost-like. They live by night, the characters of film noir. Only Frank the bartender and the lush, familiar from the opening scene, are there. In a film where everyone seems to be running one scheme or another, the lush in her inability to dissemble is its heart. She is an open book, transparently joyous over the smallest kindness and heart-broken by the smallest insult.

One detail that gives a thumbnail sketch of the noir predicament comes in the form of the Chinese chef. Steve has apparently decided to call up Anna and goes toward the phone, but this action is interrupted as the chef rushes ahead of him. He has received a “hot tip” and is in a hurry to call in a bet. But he soon returns: “Too late!” As soon as one gets an edge, it is already too late.

Gambling is everywhere in film noir. When Robert Mitchum’s character in *His Kind of Woman* (1951) introduces himself as a professional gambler he gets the response, “Who isn’t?” – a remark very indicative of the noir worldview. The point is also brought home negatively in *Johnny O’Clock* (1947), where the titular character, played by Dick Powell, is very keen to assert his self-sufficiency, and that he refuses to gamble attests to this fact. Unsurprisingly, this is shown to be naive, and Johnny finds himself framed for a number of murders. As he still insists on not needing

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92 Critchley 2019: 13
93 Critchley 2019: 272. He borrows this sentence from Judith Butler.
anybody, and refusing to surrender himself to the police and hope that the truth will come out, his pretensions to control are, at the end of the film, satisfyingly lambasted by his girlfriend:

I haven’t had enough tears. I want more. I want to be able to say, “Do you know who I’m crying for? Johnny O’Clock. You know who he was? The smartest man in the world. I know because he told me so. ‘Johnny O’Clock’s no fool,’ he said. ‘No fool.’ That’s why he’s dead, because he’s no fool!”

This speech gets to Johnny and he gives up. Johnny is convinced that this means he is done for (“Well, looks like it’s gonna be a hot day.”) but the cop who has been after him tells him this is not the case (“Not too hot.”). This makes Johnny, in the final lines of the film, return to the language of gambling: “Wanna bet?” “Bet? I’ll lay you odds,” smiles the cop, effectively saying that an acknowledgment of one’s limitations is not an admittance of defeat. Pippin links the gambling motif to the fatalism theme, interpreting it as an acceptance on the characters’ part that they are not really in control. The chips will fall where they may, but they can assert themselves in placing a bet on the outcome.94

Back in the Round-Up, before Steve gets to make his phone call, Pete shows up. As if waking from a haze, Steve asserts to Pete, and perhaps more to himself, that he is definitely not back in town to see Anna again. Mm-hm.

After having dinner with his family, Steve turns down offers to go out, but he keeps looking at the phone without realizing. As Steve plants himself on the sofa, Slade tries to get a bit frisky with his girlfriend, but on account of Steve’s presence she resists. This leads to the two of them play-acting a scene where an insulted Slade sternly raises his hand as if to strike her and she swoons at this display of manliness and falls into his arms. For Slade and Helen, normies that they are, such a scene of Sturm und Drang is something to be parodied, but for Steve, rather darkly, this vignette brings to mind (not that it was ever from his mind) his relationship with Anna.

We are surprised to learn here from the voice-over that Steve and Anna used to be married. They were married some two years ago and it lasted seven months. Stanley Cavell’s book on “the comedy of remarriage” analyzes plots where divorcees reunite were popular in screwball comedies of the 1930s and ‘40s,95 and it is unexpected in film noir. There are times when a husband, after

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94 Pippin 2012: 31
95 Cavell 1981
having gotten himself into whatever kind of trouble, at the end gets to return to his wholesome wife, but such romances do not tend to be propulsive to the plot. In noir what tends to count is the first meeting, what Pippin calls “stunned by a femme fatale” scenes, where a man is rendered unable to think for himself as he falls under a woman’s thrall. Here, Pippin says, “we are immediately invited to believe that a woman can control a man passively, by being desired,” and, in the case of the femme fatale, the woman will use this control in ways that lead the man to his ruin. While film noir often latches on to male fears in such situations, it is of course true that desire does involve such an ambiguity between the active and the passive. As Judith Butler so nicely puts it:

Let’s face it. We’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something. If this seems so clearly the case with grief, it is only because it was already the case with desire. One does not always stay intact. It may be that one wants to, or does, but it may also be that despite one’s best efforts, one is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel.

Steve is not intact as the prospect of the touch and the memory of the feel is pulling at him.

“A man eats an apple,” Steve muses in voice-over. “He gets a piece of the core stuck between his teeth, you know? He tries to work it out with some cellophane off a cigarette pack. What happens? The cellophane gets stuck in there too.” One recalls Luther’s claim that sin draws after it sin upon sin, and the metaphor of eating apples is of course suggestive in this regard. As so often in film noir there is a sense that it is too late for him, the the train has left the station and there is no getting off until the end of the line. “Anna,” he continues. “What was the use? I knew one way or the other, somehow, I’d wind up seeing her that night.” Here it is very easy to make fun of Steve’s fate talk as the inevitable “one way or another, somehow” he foresees in actuality means that he heads over to the Round-Up, the place where he is most likely to run into her. We bring fate down on ourselves, sometimes a bit clumsily.

And there she is, out on the dance floor, looking good. She moves to the rhumba music. Steve stands statue-like, watching, passive as a plant. But she sees him and runs over, happy to see

96 Pippin 2012: 50
97 Butler 2004: 19
98 I willfully want to hear the names Anna and Steve as a variant of Adam and Eve, but beyond this apple metaphor this idea does not seem to have much purchase.
99 Her dance partner in this scene is an uncredited Tony Curtis in his first film role.
him, and begins talking about all the great times they had in the place. “And all the fights!” Steve blurts out, and Lancaster’s funny line-reading shows what a doofus Steve is. Anna does not miss a beat, however, and they both now seem happy to view the fighting as something crazy that young things in love do. And speaking of things young people in love do, there was the making up. “That was the best part, I think,” Anna says; “The making-up part.” The concupiscence is palpable. But just as things are starting to go well, the reunion is interrupted. The way the plot is structured, the characters get double introduction scenes and it is time for Slim Dundee to appear in this timeline. Anna is out with him. Furious about her spending time with this shady character, Steve storms off.

The following day, however, she calls him up and they meet in a drugstore. Steve is hilariously petulant. She ensures him that her being with Slim was just a simple date, and suggests that they try to get back together, but he turns her down, saying that they would only start fighting again. As if to prove that point he acts like a moody baby. As she is about to leave, however, he changes his mind. He is still extremely petulant, but this begins to appear cute, and one assumes Anna thinks so too.

Someone who is definitely not happy about the lovers reuniting is Steve’s mother, and neither is Pete the cop. The mother fairly bluntly tells Steve that emotionally he is little more than a child, while Anna, she says, in some ways knows more than Einstein. “What makes you think I don’t understand?” she accusingly asks her son. “I understand. A girl puts on a piece of silk, and the next thing that happens, a young fellow like you is sure he knows exactly what he’s doing.” In her eyes, Anna is all the way the manipulative femme fatale. That “to be sure one knows exactly what one is doing” here means being a chump, a fool, a sucker, a boob, is a nice touch. Given that we are never shown exactly how bad things got between Steve and Anna the first time around it is difficult to judge how warranted these concerns are. Are we dealing with a mean mother-in-law or is she the voice of reason, warning us that the romance we are becoming invested in is something we should not root for? That we in Criss Cross have a past before the time seen in the flashback, a past that is important to what is going on but that we have only vague information about, denies us as viewers access to a crucial reference point as we try to orient ourselves in the complex plot, and this choice serves the film’s sense of tense confusion well. With Steve’s first words as the voice-over for the flashback begins are, “From the start. The beginning,” one might see this as him mistaking a mere continuation for a new beginning.
Steve's bearings are blown as one evening Anna is not there at the Round-Up where he is waiting for their date. Frank the bartender tells him the news: Anna and Slim went to Yuma and got married. The sound of the place is drowned out, and Frank is almost completely blocked out of the frame as he keeps talking. We hear Rozsa's ominous score and Steve's voice-over: “I told myself, ‘Fine.’ It was a lucky break. Probably the best thing that ever happened to me. I told myself that someday I’d look back and realize it. But I was wrong. It was in the cards, and there was no way of stopping it.” The film jumps ahead four months, and we find a dazed Steve at the train station, presumably thinking about another year travelling the country to get Anna out of his system. Fate intervenes as he is buying cigarettes and the seller has to check under the counter, and in leaning down he reveals Anna and Slim in the background, packed for a trip. As Steve stumbles out he is shocked to run into Anna, who, it turns out, was only there to see Slim off. Anna quickly goes to leave, not wanting Slim’s men to see her with Steve. But the man she thinks will drive her home is under orders from Slim to get the car to Las Vegas where he is going. Through no fault of their own, Anna and Steve are together again.

They go to her and Slim’s place. Their emotions all over the place, they alternate between intimacy and hostility. Steve calls Anna a tramp who is with Slim just for his money. She shows the bruises on her back from Slim beating her. In a development that really forces us to wonder just how bad Steve and Anna’s divorce was, we learn that Pete the cop, on the urging of Steve’s mother, had threatened to have Anna framed and sent to jail if she remained with Steve. This is later confirmed by Pete himself. Whether this threat was taken as credible or if just having cops around intimidating her was enough for Anna to want to escape the situation by going off with Slim is not clear. Some commentators, like Michael Walker, take an unambivalently critical view toward Pete, as well as Steve’s, on this view, repressive mother. Walker suggests that Pete’s hatred of Anna is rooted in an unresolved homoerotic attraction toward Steve. I find matters more confusing, and I take this confusion to be a positive feature of the film.

1 WALKER 1992: 140
Steve and Anna reignite their romance, now shrouded in secrecy. They have family members, the legal institutions, and the criminal underworld all against them. How can they resist? But danger is not just titillating; it is also dangerous. One sunny afternoon, upstairs in Steve’s home, the lovers hear a refrigerator door – quite a mundane death knell – closing downstairs. As they go down they find Slim and the boys waiting. “It don’t look right,” Slim notes menacingly. Caught, Steve is forced to improvise a cover story. It was really Slim he wanted to see, he says. That is why he asked Anna to come over. He has a business proposal for Slim, the robbery of one of the armored cars from the company where he works. We have heard that this is an impossible task, that it has been 28 years since such a robbery was successful, that it is not even tried anymore. This is also Slim’s initial response. It is possible, Steve says, if there is a man on the inside: him. Now Slim is interested, but still suspicious. Why would Steve come to him with this offer? “Because you’re the only crooks I know,” Steve answers nonchalantly. Now Slim is very interested.

When considering this cover story/plan of Steve’s, a remark from Anne Carson, in the poetic foreword to her translation of Euripides’ *Bakkhai*, comes to mind. Carson addresses our sense of “pre-history” or “previousness,” and the Freudian suspicion that we do nothing but repeat this pre-history. “Previousness is something a God can manage fairly well (‘time’ being a fiction for him),” she writes; “mortals less so.”\(^1\) She considers such previousness and the possibility of new beginnings in relation to the delicious drag scene with Pentheus under the influence of Dionysos, the god of the beginning:

Beginnings are special because most of them are fake. The new person you become with that first sip of wine was already there. Look at Pentheus twirling around in a dress, so pleased with his girl-guise he’s almost in tears. Are we to believe this desire is new? Why was he keeping that dress in the back of his closet anyhow?\(^2\)

Bringing this line of thought to our understanding of *Criss Cross*, we may ask how improvised and new Steve’s idea really is. When in the film, just before Steve gets in the car and begins to reminisce, we see his co-workers fill bags with money they are talking about the six cents difference between going to the supermarket and ordering over telephone for two cans of tomato soup. With the contrast between the vast sums they are handling at work and the minute sums that they have to

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\(^1\) Carson 2015: 7
consider in their personal lives, are we to believe that fantasies of making off with all the money never occur to them? Add to this the fact that Steve seems to think that money is what he needs for him and Anna to really be together.

This presents new factors as we consider Steve's agency. Is the fact that he is backed up against the wall and needs to deceive Slim what permits him to voice this desire? One thinks of the classic lines from Samuel Beckett's *Malone Dies*: “If I had the use of my body I would throw it out of the window. But perhaps it is the knowledge of my impotence that emboldens me to that thought. All hangs together, I am in chains.” Might we not think that the purported impossibility of robbing an armored truck lets Steve idly and innocently entertain the prospect, and only when this impossible plan begins to look like a necessity, when he feels he has no choice, is he emboldened to act on this desire? If this is so it is difficult to determine the extent to which Steve can be said to act voluntarily or non-voluntarily, intentionally or impulsively. And if there is something to the thought that he can express his true desire only when not speaking as himself, when he can plausibly convince himself that he is lying, this would amount to another instance of being fated (in Pippin's capacious sense of the word), where he is unable to stand in the place of his own desire, authentic, acting of his own control. Either way, one notes that once the plan is underway he makes no attempts to stop it from happening.

“To make the performance of a tedious, exacting, time-consuming task riveting to watch, it is only necessary for the activity to be illegal. This is the lesson of heist movies,” writes Imogen Sara Smith. *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) is customarily seen as the first bona fide heist movie, but *Criss Cross* is not far from qualifying. Finchley, a brilliant strategist is brought in to plan the details, in exchange for which he gets a month's credit at the liquor store. The excitement is strong, all talk of the impossibility of the venture be damned (“Just dropped by to tell you you're wasting your time,” Finchley says as he first meets the gang. “We know all that, Finchley. Come on. Let's go to work,” Slim replies). One of Slim's men speaks starry-eyed about an old armored truck hold-up where $427,950 was taken. “But the cops caught 'em, every one,” he is reminded. “They're all dead now. Electric chair, everything.”

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103 Beckett 1956: 44
104 Smith 2017
“Yeah, I realize,” he concedes. “But 400 grand.” That two and two equal four is more than one can sometimes endure, as that book said.

Steve and Slim agree on a 50-50 split, half for Steve, half for Slim to divide among his people as he sees fit. Steve’s true plan is that he and Anna will take all the money, and he succeeds in making Slim think that it is his, Slim’s, idea that for the cooling off period after the job is done the money should be left with Anna, a vital part of the true plan.

Anna is the least enthusiastic member of the group. “I wish we’d never met,” she tells Steve, doom in her demeanor, as they manage to get a moment alone, but perhaps Walker is right in his commentary when he suggests that she deep down finds them enacting the parts of doomed lovers a bit exiting, therefore playing it up.105

3.4 The Payoff

With the plan established the time has come to see in what way it will fail.

We return to Steve in the truck, adrenaline levels rising, approaching the delivery point – the place where the robbery will take place. Elements of the plan are where they are supposed to be; the ice cream truck that is to be used as a getaway car is in place. The nervous mood turns ominous as we see in a bodeful aerial shot the truck arriving, as if from the point of view of a hidden, distant but ever-watchful God.

The robbery sequence that follows is equally visually stunning. It goes on for about four minutes and is without dialogue. An explosion from a manhole fills the air with smoke, which is made even thicker by smoke grenades going off. Then things go wrong. Steve has been adamant in the planning that old man Pop must not be hurt, and that there will not be any shooting. But Pop of course does not know this. After one of Slim’s men fails to knock Pop out as he is stealing his moneybags, Pop fires his gun at him. Then Slim emerges out of the smoke, looking good in a light suit and gas mask, and shoots Pop dead.

Steve’s fumbling around in this dense smoke is clearly also an image representing his ethical and epistemic situation. Carl Reinhold Bråkenhielm has noted that, in articulating a worldview, it is often conducive to use an image, or, as he says, a “foundational metaphor,” which can inform an

105 Walker 1992: 143
entire complex of positions. He gives as an example the way materialistic worldviews uses different machine metaphors (a classic example here being the world as a watch, perhaps indicating the existence of a watchmaker). In this scene, Criss Cross screens its own foundational metaphor.

Steve decides to abort the plan. After some fighting and shooting, he manages to get the moneybags he was carrying locked back in the truck before he passes out, shot but alive, and having shot Slim in the leg.

3.5 What a Pity It Didn’t Work Out

Pippin points out that the leading men in many film noirs used a special acting technique, “strikingly persistent and somewhat unnerving,” he calls it. The characters do things, but appear as if hypnotized, dazed, or sleepwalking. It is, Pippin writes, as if they are trying to portray a kind of ‘passive agency,’ an agency that does not follow the reflective model of knowing what one is doing and why. Something film can do that other means of doing philosophy will struggle with is to show what this, in fact, looks like. “The passivity,” Pippin says of this technique of acting, “is especially striking when combined with an actor of animal-like physicality reduced to an almost whimpering passivity, such as Burt Lancaster in Siodmak’s Criss Cross and The Killers.” And never is he more dazed or sleepwalking than in the final act of Criss Cross.

Steve wakes up in hospital a celebrated hero with his picture in the newspapers. His arms and one shoulder are in traction, his passivity reaching a new level. His family is there to tell him how proud they are. The mood is slightly hallucinatory as Steve drifts in and out of consciousness.

The next time he awakes he has a visitor:

“Pete,” says Steve.

“Lieutenant,” he is corrected, an inversion of the conversation in the bar at the beginning of the film.

Again, Walker, in his interpretation, really does not like Pete, claiming that he appears in the room “almost like the Devil, waiting to claim Steve’s soul.” This is a bit harsh. Pete has indeed

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106 Bråkenhielm 2001: 12
107 Pippin 2012: 17
108 One wonders is Paul Schrader and Martin Scorsese thought about this scene when they constructed the ending of the neo-noir classic Taxi Driver (1976).
109 Walker 1992: 144
figured out that Steve acted as an inside man for the robbery. But, as Walker neglects to note, Pete is making excuses for Steve, assuming that Anna and Slim must have played him for a fool. This might of course be a dissimulation and an interrogation technique. Either way, Steve does not want to listen. “Get your stupid cop’s face out of here,” our hero sneers. And Pete leaves, but not before pointing out that Steve should consider that if Anna has betrayed him, he will be fine, but if she has betrayed Slim and is waiting somewhere for Steve, then Slim will make sure to have someone come and get Steve.

And a man comes. When the night falls, Nelson, the nice man in the hall who is so worried about his wife who has been in an accident, is suddenly an efficient and brutal kidnapper. It is a classic good news/bad news situation. Anna has not betrayed him, but he is now being taken to the murderous gangster. Steve bribes Nelson to instead drive him to Anna and the cottage in Palos Verdes. Located near the beach it looks as if it is standing at the edge of the world.

Anna is immediately anxious when they show up, and rightly so. She understands that after they have paid Nelson he is still likely to go back to Slim and reveal where she is. She knows she has to leave and she knows that Steve is too injured to come with her. Steve takes this in for a moment.

“You weren’t lying. You meant it. I know you meant it,” he says, trying to figure things out. “You love me.”

“Love, love. You have to watch out for yourself,” she responds. “That’s the way it is. I’m sorry. What do you want me to do, throw away all this money? You always have to do what’s best for yourself.” To here choose love is to choose death, and self-preservation wins out.

As soon as Anna has walked out the door, however, she returns with a startled expression. Staring out into the pitch black night, Steve and Anna wait. Slim emerges from out of the darkness, a cane in one hand, a gun in the other. “You really loved her,” he says to Steve. “You know, I did too.” Like a director, he instructs them to hold each other. The last thing they say before Slim kills them is each other’s names.

Slim exits the cabin to the sound of police sirens approaching, but we go back inside and the final image shows Anna and Steve, her lying in his arms in an elegant arch. “The image is morbid, wondrous, and romantic,” Thompson writes, “and it is the final admission of Criss Cross as a love story where fools try crime to prove they are grown up.”

110 Thompson 1990: 20
“Noir is romanticism embittered,” says poet April Bernard; “The life of feeling that has been betrayed leads to the attitude and genre of noir. No one who loves noir is a cynic – cynics never believed in anything in the first place. People who love noir are disillusioned romantics.” The cynic, on this definition, would be someone “well-adjusted to injustice and well-adapted to indifference,” to coin Cornel West’s fine phrase. The noir mood is more desperate than well-adjusted, corresponding to malaise more than indifference. And Bernard roots this noir attitude in a romantic worldview. She defines romanticism as “the belief that feeling is primary and [that] expressing feeling will lead you to spiritual enlightenment. When you find out that it doesn’t,” she says, “you end up in a place of noir.”

There is bitterness in the noir worldview. “You’re a bitter little woman,” Joan Bennett’s character in Hollow Triumph (1948) is told.

“It’s a bitter little world,” she responds.

But there is also romance, the life of feeling fighting desperately against its seemingly unavoidable tendency to self-sabotage. “It could’ve been wonderful, but it didn’t work out,” Steve says in the final scene of Criss Cross. “What a pity it didn’t work out.”

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111 In Scribner 2010
112 West 2014: 165
4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

“Tough as the fists of killers! Beautiful as the women they kill for!” boasts a newsprint advertisement for *Desert Fury* (1947).\(^{113}\) The tough beauty of the classic Hollywood film noir era continues to fascinate movie audiences.

In this short study, I have sought to address themes that come to the fore in these films, focusing on the depiction of human existence as characterized by insecurity and malaise, of us as enigmatic to ourselves and therefore languorous. The constant presence in film noir of a desperate urge to escape, as well as the failure and disappointment where the attempts of escape end up, has been considered through discussions of a few particular films. A theme that has come up again and again is the ambition to start anew, to annihilate the burden of the past, and act, think, and love as an unconditioned and completely free subject. I have suggested that film noir follows the Christian doctrine of original sin as seeing this ambition as, while impossible, a characteristic of the human mode of existence. I have also in the discussions drawn freely from, for example, (broadly speaking) existential philosophy and reflections on Greek tragedy, and the role of fate in those dramas.

In short, film noir invites us to view human existence as standing in need of redemption, while holding that it is at best uncertain if such redemption is possible. At its most pessimistic noir suggests that in lieu of grace, faked deaths and assumed identities appear as last-ditch efforts at being born again. What can be said to be noir’s focus is instead the struggle for redemption, and a sympathy toward the desperation and failure that must characterize this ongoing struggle.

\(^{113}\) Koenig 2020: “Desert Fury”
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