*The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 2022, **XX**, 1–4
https://doi.org/10.1093/jaac/kpac011
Advance access publication 10 March 2022
**Book Review**





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## Pippin, Robert B. *Douglas Sirk: Filmmaker and Philosopher* London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021, 168 pp., 30 color illus., $26.95 paper.

Central to Robert Pippin's growing body of work on narrative film are two organizing claims, which he continues to elaborate and defend in his new book *Douglas Sirk: Filmmaker and Philosopher*, an installment in an exciting new film and philosophy series by Bloomsbury. First, Pippin argues that film is not merely an "aid" to philosophy but is a "form" of philosophy itself, in the way that dialogue, aphorism, confession, treatise, or a lecture are forms of philosophy (p. 24). A film can function not merely as an illustration or case study for an already articulate philosophical position, but can itself put forward—picture, project—philosophical positions. If philosophy is construed on what Pippin calls the "Socratic conception"—where doing philosophy "helps us see what we already knew and did not know we did," and thereby come a better appreciation of the depth of our stakes this knowledge (or belief)—then film can directly contribute to such philosophical ends, can count as "philosophy by other means," to borrow the title of another of Pippin's recent works in aesthetics (pp. 25, 28). I return to the question of film as philosophy in the second half of this review.

Pippin's second and more specific organizing claim is that film has unique capacities for exploring and rendering intelligible an aspect of the human condition that Pippin calls *unknowingness*. In previous work, Pippin has examined *unknowingness* as screened, projected, and elaborated in Hitchcock, *film noir*, and in the Dardennes brothers. The concept is capacious: "Being deceived, being self-deceived, being uncertain, but partly right, living over an extended period of time in a kind of suspension, having to make decisions about trust or disapproval, while uncertain of the relevant act descriptions or ascriptions of responsibility on which they are based, but not devoid of some markers of what would be the appropriate response, all amount to a swirl of uncertainty and partial confidence that, it seemed to me, required some capacious if unusual term. Hence 'unknowingness.'" (*The Philosophical Hitchcock: "Vertigo" and the Anxieties of Unknowingness*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2017, p. 17).

One species or inflection of unknowingness is *self-blindness*, and this is the focus of the book on Sirk. For Pippin, self-blindness is a condition that must be understood in the context of and as a response to a specific social reality (thus, Pippin distinguishes self-blindness from self-deception, conceived as a more narrowly individual and psychological pathology). Self-blindness is not only a defensive way of managing a painful reality, but can be actively prompted and even demanded by specific socio-historical realities; such self-blindness is a necessary product of such worlds, "necessary for its survival" (p. 32). Guided by a Hegelian and Nietzschean philosophical orientation, Pippin argues that socio-political regimes and forms of life require, produce, and sustain certain types of *soul* (and so foreclose and destroy others) (p. 28). This interpenetration of intra- and extra-psychic relations is what Pippin calls "the politics of emotional life" (ibid.). Crucially, persons are not typically aware (or not straightforwardly aware) of the politics of their inner lives but are for the most part blind to the shape and shaping power of the world, and so they are blind to themselves, to how they have been shaped, and to how they continue to reproduce those shapes in themselves and those around them.

In the Sirk book, Pippin's more particular claim is that the genre of melodrama is especially well-suited to explore self-blindness, and even more particularly, Pippin focuses on a special sub-category of the genre that he calls "subversive melodrama." Subversive melodrama is marked by a more or less acute uncertainty or unease that registers narratively and formally, and where this is in turn registered by the attentive viewer who will find herself unresolved ("a sense of closure cannot be fully indulged") (p. 14). For Pippin, these films operate at two levels: on one level there is the story, with its plot and characters, operating in a particular affective and moral world. But there is another level, signaled through a kind of excessive aestheticization, that troubles our ability to be absorbed by the story of the first level, and often prompts a kind of critical (though not criticizing) distance. Pippin describes the latter level as engaging a kind of "irony," which is both an aesthetic strategy and an ethical stance. The irony of subversive melodrama is exemplified especially well in two aesthetic-narrative strategies: in the ambiguous deployment of moral categories, and in the ambiguity of the ending.

Pippin argues that Sirk engages moral concepts ironically. According to Pippin, Sirk initially (or at one level) activates these categories in order to provide a familiar framework for organizing the film and orienting the audience. But then Sirk undermines these categories, revealing them to be too crude an instrument for understanding the lives he is exploring, and as inimical to genuine sympathy. For instance, *Written on the Wind* (1956) at first invites or allows the audience to orient to the characters of Marylee and Kyle, wealthy, self- and other-destructive siblings, in moral terms; maybe we think they are "bad" or "cruel" or "unsympathetic" for what they do, etc. This initial moral frame is intuitive and tempting partly because this is the standard frame for organizing and interpreting standard Hollywood narrative film (the success of the reversal of Sirk's films thus depends on activating cultivated habits of film literacy). But as the film develops and it is revealed how deeply sad, damaged, lost, self-blind, and lonely these characters are, moral concepts no longer seem appropriate. In fact, it begins to seem "bad" or "cruel" or "unsympathetic" to use them.

This then has the potential for a reflexive twist. If the viewer can catch herself in this temptation to moralism and recognize its inappropriateness, this can constitute a moment of the viewer catching herself in her *own* blindness. After all, *our* world instructs us to use moral concepts to make sense of it and to shape our souls accordingly. Thus to realize over the course of the film that moral concepts are not only irrelevant but perverse is to notice how one's standard ways of seeing and interpreting self and others have been shaped and cultivated without one's awareness.

Regarding the doubled endings of subversive melodramas: on the one hand, the endings seem to provide recognizable narrative resolution in the form of a happy ending, and yet on the other hand, this happy ending is discordant or ambivalent. *Written on the Wind* ends with the union of the couple that the film puts forward as the couple to root for, and yet this apparently happy union rings false or shrill, as though it didn't fully believe in itself. Typically, a happy ending functions to justify whatever troubles or mishaps precede it, but here the suffering, isolation, and deaths of the other characters insists in a way that makes the couple's happiness hard to celebrate, even as their smiling faces, star power (it is Lauren Bacall and Rock Hudson, after all), and sweeping music suggests that we should.

Here again the discordant ending provides an occasion for the viewer to catch a glimpse of her own self-blindness, simply in having to reflect on why the ending feels so *off*: why isn't this ending satisfying? Why was I rooting for these characters? What did I want here, and what am I getting instead?

These are two examples of the formal, narrative, moral, and affective forms of discordance that distinguishes the subversive melodrama, which Pippin regards as singularly suited for exploring self-blindness, and where this discordance (or irony) can be an occasion for an uncanny kind of awareness of self-blindness in the audience. Indeed, Sirk himself described his films as efforts to "awaken the audience to a consciousness of conditions." (should I cite?)

Now of course traditional or standard philosophy is capable of examining and analyzing an idea like self-blindness. And traditional or standard philosophy might even be able to work on multiple levels so as to implicate the audience in a way that can prompt a kind of self-consciousness. This is the strategy of Plato and Socrates, and Nietzsche too—though it is significant that none of these styles is or ever was "standard." So we must ask: what are the capacities and standards specific to cinema thanks to which this medium has something distinctive and irreducibly cinematic to offer to, or rather to *count as* philosophy?

Throughout his work on film, Pippin's focus is for the most part narrative and characterological. There is perhaps insufficient attention given to film as *form* or to film *ontology*. Three areas of research seem important to pursue, given Pippin's project.

First, what difference is made by telling these stories and exploring these philosophical issues in the cinema, rather than say, the novel or the theater? Pippin does call attention to, for example, *mise-en-scene* or acting or camera angles, but more needs to be said here in order to make the case for cinema's specifically cinematic contribution to philosophy.

Second, relatedly, what is the philosophical significance of film as medium and as cultural institution? As comparisons: Gilles Deleuze's work on film is especially concerned with the former, James Baldwin's is concerned with the latter, and Stanley Cavell's work is concerned with both. These thinkers find it philosophically productive to reflect on the fact of film as a photographic medium in such a way that makes it mysterious (again). Deleuze, for instance, is preoccupied with different cinematic regimes for managing time, reflection on which yields insights into relationships between time, movement, and logics of sense. And both Cavell's and Baldwin's respective reflections on the phenomenon of the film star—stars like Humphrey Bogart, Sidney Poitier, Rock Hudson—yields fresh insights (or fresh mysteries) regarding the uncertain relationships between actor and role, between the pre-filmic real world and the film world and the ways in which they are and are not separable. Consider, for instance, the way that Hollywood gossip—an essential component of the total studio system, and hence cinema itself—shapes our experience of Rock Hudson as a straight leading male. I would argue that Hudson's status as a queer icon plays a formal role in generating the kind of irony and subversiveness that interests Pippin. That we see and experience not only Mitch Wayne but "Rock Hudson," cultural icon, is one of the reasons we cannot take full or straight-forward satisfaction in *Written on the Wind's* happy couple.

Finally, how should we think of the philosophical significance of film now that the institution and apparatus has changed so profoundly, and is arguably declining? Movies were never just projected pictures but involved practices, institutions, a shared cultural field, a shared language, and so forth. Movies are forms of life. And yet we no longer live in a film society. So how should this inform our philosophical thinking about film, now? Again, this seems especially relevant to Pippin's concerns—both his work on film and his work on human agency more broadly—given that, for Pippin, roles, social institutions, social practices, and forms of life make us what we are. We are never just isolated individuals but always integrants in larger wholes, which wholes are not fixed but dynamic, and can come to an end. So, if the cinematic form of life is passed or passing, what is film for us now? And given our participation and transformation by the cinematic form of life, what are we now?

I turn now to the question whether film *is* or can *be* philosophy.

Pippin argues that film's contribution to philosophy consists in its making a life world phenomenologically available in a way that (traditional) philosophy cannot. He quickly insists that this does not mean that film functions as "a mere reservoir of evidence for philosophy"—which, I confess, is how I had initially understood the idea (p. 27). So we must be more precise about the difference between making a world phenomenologically available and providing evidence for philosophy. More needs to be said about the idea—the philosophical *position*—that with respect to certain concepts, there can be *no* adequate philosophical understanding without appreciation of their concrete realization and worldly embodiment, at some time, in some world.

With respect to some concepts, it might be thought that theoretical comprehension is not enough, I have to *do* or *enact* or *experience* the thing in order to understand it (this is something like *know how*). Pippin wants to argue that appreciating the *aesthetic* articulation of a concept is also a way of properly and philosophically grasping some concepts. So, it's still the case that theoretical reflection won't teach me what I need to know about, say, love, or self-blindness, or loneliness, but I needn't literally go through the motions; I can go to the movies. The movies do not give me "evidence" of an already fully articulated and appreciated concept; rather (if I understand Pippin correctly) the movies *articulate* the concept, so that in appreciating the movie, I (only) now appreciate the concept. For Pippin, this means that both the movie and audience are "doing philosophy." Films and filmgoing are not tangential or supplementary to philosophy but are themselves instances of the activity of philosophizing.

I think there is reason to resist this claim. I worry, to put it a little bluntly, that only philosophers would welcome the news that film itself can "count" as philosophy (it is a habit as old as philosophy

for philosophers to maintain that anything of value, any life worth living, must be or involve some kind of philosophy). The other worry is that if philosophy is defined too broadly, then it becomes such a diffuse and capacious notion that *anything* reflectively sophisticated becomes philosophy (Murray Smith calls this the "expansive strategy," which renders the claim "film can be philosophy" uninteresting, because nothing would be ruled out).

What is at stake in insisting that film *is* philosophy? One of the main motivations for Pippin (and others) is negative, to reject the picture of film as a *mere* case study or aid or reservoir of evidence for philosophy. I agree: this would be a strange and impoverished way of thinking about the relationship between philosophy and film (or any other kind of art). But why proceed as though the only alternative is to assert an identity, *film is philosophy*? Why not say that the relationship between film (and art generally) and philosophy is uneasy, vertiginous, not easy to draw? Why not allow film to pose a challenge to philosophy and its self-understanding, a challenge posed from a position of unsettling proximity but not one of identity? Why not let philosophy help explore the mystery of what cinema is, and let cinema help explore the mystery of philosophy? Art has always made philosophy nervous, uncertain; this uncertainty can be productive, if philosophy can resist two kinds of defensiveness, banishing art or absorbing it. I worry that something of this productive nervousness would be lost if we go so far as to say that film *is* philosophy.

Allowing for this uncertain distinction would let film to do its own thing (mysterious and uncertain as that is). All discourses of sense-making picture the world in *their* terms: for example, psychology analyzes the world insofar as it is minded, music considers the world as sounding, and anthropology analyses the world insofar as it is human. How does philosophy analyze the world? Perhaps: as rational or amenable to rational articulation. To ask and answer this question is to ask and answer the question: *what is philosophy?*

And how does cinema see and project the world? This gets us back to the philosophical importance of articulating an ontology of film. What is it to see or experience the world—including oneself and others—cinematically? What is specifically cinematic about this vision and projection? I can't here propose answers, since to ask and answer these questions is to ask and answer the question: *what is film?*

That Pippin's book provides occasion for these reflections testifies to its deep thoughtfulness, a thoughtfulness that expresses an evidently deep love of film in general and these films in particular (their characters, their colors, their angles, their thoughtfulness). Pippin has argued that understanding certain concepts requires aesthetic appreciation, and I think Pippin's book shows that understanding film requires loving it. This evident love gives a real *pathos* to Pippin's writing. In turn there is a *pathos* in the experience of reading it, and in turn a *pathos* in the experience of watching or re-watching the films in light of this reading. Reflecting on Pippin's interpretations helped me become more articulate about my own readings (and more articulate about my uncertainties). So even if one does not always agree with how Pippin sees these films, seeing how he sees them will facilitate one's vision.

This kind of work of philosophy is significant not only for the sub-discipline of aesthetics, or the sub-sub-discipline of film-philosophy. It is significant for the discipline of philosophy in general, especially now. Pippin's book resists sub-disciplinary categorization, both at the level of content—bringing together moral psychology, political philosophy, history of philosophy, and aesthetics—and at the level of form—rejecting a certain argumentative, rhetorical narrowness that has become rather ubiquitous (letting some *pathos* back in). All of this is to say that this book constitutes a contribution and critical engagement with the question of what philosophy can look like, what it can be: Pippin raises this question with respect to the medium of film, but the book itself, its form, poses the question to us as well.

In closing, I would like to thank and acknowledge Nick Stang, Matt Strohl, and Robert Pippin for our conversations about the book at the annual meeting of American Society for Aesthetics, which informed this review.

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