

# Jacques Tourneur's *Out of the Past* (1947): The weight of history

David Walsh, Joanne Laurier  
5 September 2015

On August 29, the Detroit Film Theatre, part of the Detroit Institute of Arts, screened Jacques Tourneur's *Out of the Past* (1947), a seductively elegant and disturbing black-and-white film.

Tourneur's film, adapted from *Build My Gallows High*, a novel by American writer Daniel Mainwaring published in 1946, has one of the most suggestive titles in cinema history.

The central figure in *Out of the Past* is Jeff Bailey (Robert Mitchum), who operates a gas station in Bridgeport, a small California town. His employee and close friend is The Kid (former child star Dickie Moore), a young deaf-mute.

The film opens with the camera inside a car driven by a hoodlum, Joe Stefanos (Paul Valentine). He is heading into Bridgeport to inform Bailey that his former boss, big-time gambler Whit Sterling (Kirk Douglas), wants to see him at his mansion on Lake Tahoe (near the California-Nevada border).

Bailey has distanced himself from his old existence. He is in love with Ann Miller (Virginia Huston), a local woman, and hopes to build a life with her. Nonetheless, he feels obliged to comply with Sterling's summons. It only becomes clear why during his night-time drive to Lake Tahoe with Ann, during which he tells her—this occurs in the form of an unusually extended flashback—about his past (“Some of it’s going to hurt you” “It doesn’t matter”).

Several years earlier Bailey (whose real name is Jeff Markham), a private detective in New York, was hired by Sterling, for a large fee, to find a woman, Kathie Moffat (Jane Greer), who shot and wounded Sterling and stole \$40,000 of his money.

Jeff eventually tracks down the alluring Kathie in Acapulco. He falls for her, and she apparently for him. Hopelessly infatuated and also anxious about what Whit will do to the woman if he brings her back to New York, Jeff takes off with Kathie and they go into hiding for awhile.

However, Jeff's former partner, Fisher (Steve Brodie), ultimately locates the pair at a cabin in the woods and demands hush money (“So just pay me off and I’m quiet, but use cash”). Kathie shoots and kills him, unnecessarily, and then disappears.

In the present, Jeff finds Kathie living at Whit's palatial residence (“I couldn't help it, Jeff”). Knowing now that he owes Sterling, Jeff agrees to do a job for the gambler-gangster, stealing Whit's tax records from an attorney in San Francisco who is using them for blackmail purposes.

Once in that city, Bailey soon realizes that Whit is planning to frame him for the murders of both Fisher and the blackmailer (“Two birds together”). Struggling to find a way out of his difficult situation, Bailey attempts to outmaneuver Whit, Kathie and their accomplices. He returns to Bridgeport, reassures Ann of his feelings for her, and receives a commitment of her love in return. In a final effort to extricate himself, Jeff proposes a deal to Whit that would tie up all the loose ends. Everything unravels, however, and the film ends tragically, with six people having met violent deaths.

*Out of the Past* is a beautiful film to watch. Indeed, certain sequences,

especially those set in the cantina and on the beach in Acapulco or on the wet streets of San Francisco are almost painfully exquisite. Tourneur's pictorial sense is legendary, and justly so. Film historian James Naremore notes that the movie “derives some of its most captivating moments from the fact that it was produced at a studio [RKO] where nearly everything was composed of rich, India-ink blacks and silvery highlights. Photographer Nicholas Musuraca and director Jacques Tourneur ...were especially good at creating a lyrical or sensuous play of shadow, and their considerable talents are evident throughout.”

The Paris-born director (1904-1977) could call on a considerable cultural background. His father was Maurice Tourneur (1876-1961), a prominent filmmaker of the silent era, who made movies—first for a French film company expanding into the American market—in the US from 1914 until late in the 1920s, at which time he returned to France (as did his son). Earlier, the elder Tourneur had a distinguished career in the visual arts as a designer and illustrator, having served as an assistant to sculptor Auguste Rodin and painter-muralist Puvis de Chavannes.

Jacques Tourneur moved back to the US in the mid-1930s. His first feature film in Hollywood, *They All Come Out*, a crime drama, was released in 1939. Aside from *Out of the Past*, he is probably best known for the three remarkable, atmospheric films he made with producer Val Lewton, *Cat People* (1942), *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) and *The Leopard Man* (1943). Despite the somewhat lurid subject matter, Tourneur directed these films with his customary subtlety. They are not truly “horror” films at all, but treatments of extreme psychological states and disorders.

Daniel Mainwaring (1902-1977), the author of the novel and screenplay (with uncredited assistance from novelist James M. Cain), has an interesting history as well. Born in Oakland, California in 1902, he began his career as a journalist. A left-winger, Mainwaring once asserted that he learned his socialist politics from itinerant Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) fruit pickers he worked with as a young man.

He wrote “proletarian fiction” in the early 1930s, including a novel, *One Against the Earth* (1933). His short story, “Fruit Tramp,” published in *Harper's* magazine in 1934, is an account of a strike by fruit pickers against their wages being cut to starvation levels by farmers who themselves are barely keeping their heads above water. It is a relatively restrained and strongly felt work, whose style is clearly influenced by Hemingway, among others.

Mainwaring produced detective stories under the name Geoffrey Homes for a number of years, before breaking away to write *Build My Gallows High*. Although he never joined the Communist Party, Mainwaring associated with numerous writers and directors who were eventually blacklisted. According to writer Tom Flinn, the screenwriter endured “a brush with Hollywood witch hunters.”

Mainwaring went on to write the scripts for a number of other intriguing films, including Don Siegel's *The Big Steal* (1949, also with Mitchum and Greer), Joseph Losey's *The Lawless* (1950, about Mexican immigrant

youth victimized by mob violence), Anthony Mann's *The Tall Target* (1951, about an assassination plot against Abraham Lincoln), Ida Lupino's *The Hitch-hiker* (1953), Phil Karlson's *The Phenix City Story* (1955—more on this below) and Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956).

Tourneur was not always the most forceful film director, and his work in film and television would fade away into mediocrity by the late 1950s. *Out of the Past*, however, is a very forceful film, in its own dignified fashion. Morally and psychologically forceful. Considering its subject matter, there is very little overt violence in the film. A few punches are thrown, a face gets slapped. Two of the killings take place off-screen, the other deaths are over in a matter of seconds.

In part, the lack of external force results from the film's deterministic attitude toward the events and the social structures it represents. The characters are part of a system with an unrelenting logic. Very few direct orders are ever given. Stefanos is nearly apologetic about delivering Whit's message to Jeff ("I'm still working for that guy, Jeff ... He'd like to see you"). The threat behind his visit is largely implied. For his part, Whit smiles and jokes, and almost never raises his voice. He doesn't have to, his money and power automatically demand respect.

Bailey is a small businessman, Sterling is a big, parasitical one, as the former explains early in the film: "It's very simple. I sell gasoline. I make a small profit. With that I buy groceries, the grocer makes a profit. They call it earning a living. You may have heard of it somewhere."

In *Out of the Past*, city life (in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco) is corrupt. Selfish deal-making seems to be the characters' principal activity, although the feverish activity often proves futile and even counterproductive. Jeff's original sin, the act from which he never fully recovers, is accepting Whit's offer of "an even five thousand [dollars] now and five when you bring her back." People betray each other without batting an eye. Whit's trusted attorney is extorting money from him. The lawyer's secretary (and perhaps lover) conspires in her employer's murder. Kathie changes sides "so smoothly," in Jeff's words, and with alarming regularity.

On the other hand, Bridgeport is narrow, gossipy, dull. The talkative woman who owns the local café explains in one of the opening scenes, "Nothing can happen in this town that I don't hear about it." Ann's parents disapprove of the perhaps dangerous and certainly "mysterious" Jeff Bailey. They would prefer she marry her honest, stolid suitor, Jim (Richard Webb), the local game warden. That prospect though seems almost unendurable. The screenwriter Mainwaring once told an interviewer, "Small towns are miserable places."

Kathie tells Jeff on several occasions, "I couldn't help it." Once she adds, "I was caught too." Her switching allegiances, the way she turns her sexual charm on and off, is portrayed unsympathetically for the most part, and Bailey sees her finally as some sort of monster. But here too, social reality comes into play. As a woman, she has to make use of what leverage she has. One thinks of novelist Alfred Döblin's comment that women make up a "downtrodden sex that keeps battling to assert itself and, like terrorists, does not shrink from the most inhumane acts of violence."

"I was caught too"—like a fish. Fishing gear and nets feature prominently at critical moments in *Out of the Past*.

One must say that the acting as a whole is superb. Mitchum is at his best here, taking every moment distinctly and sincerely. Greer manages to convince us of each one of her intense emotional states, as well as the transitions between them. Douglas remains under control throughout, quite frightening in his calm, methodical manner. When he shows up out of the blue at Jeff's hotel room door in Acapulco (not knowing that Bailey and Kathie are carrying on a torrid affair), sees the latter's crestfallen face and cheerfully exclaims, "I hate surprises myself. You want to just shut the door and forget it?" one feels the hair stand up on the back of one's

neck.

Paul Valentine as the explosive yet reluctant thug ("I never saw anyone so afraid to die. I didn't like it") is a revelation. Moore, still alive at nearly 90 and one of the last actors alive to have worked in silent films, gives a touching performance. That Tourneur chooses to close the film on an image of the mute "Kid," who has lost the only person in town with whom he could communicate and whose situation may be the most tragic of all, is a tribute to the director's humanity.

The tone throughout is quite subdued, although the work is not cynical or pessimistic in its totality, not in the slightest. Bailey-Mitchum continues to fight, against difficult odds, for the possibility of a future until the very last instant. Nonetheless, from the first moments the viewer recognizes that Bailey will be drawn back into the sordid milieu he wants so desperately to escape. He "can't help it," in a sense, any more than Kathie can. He has participated in corrupt activities and, to a certain extent, been formed or deformed by them.

Speaking of himself in the third person, Bailey tells Ann about his days as a private detective in New York: "He worked with a sort of stupid, oily gent by the name of Jack Fisher." (After all, how did he ever come to the attention of a major gangster like Sterling?) And later, he explains, "I opened an office in San Francisco. A cheap little rat hole that suited the work I did. Shabby jobs for who'd ever hire me. It was the bottom of the barrel, and I scraped it." Finally, Jeff resignedly tells Kathie, "We deserve each other."

The weight of his past "dirty life," his "stinking life," as his rival for Ann's affections describes it, proves too overwhelming. In general, efforts to forget are worse than useless. After Bailey recounts his history, Ann asserts, somewhat wishfully, "It's all past," but Jeff quickly replies, "Maybe it isn't." Toward the end of *Out of the Past*, Kathie suggests to Bailey that "We can go back to Acapulco ... and start all over as though nothing had happened," but far too much water has flowed under the bridge. In Mainwaring's novel, Bailey tells Ann, "I've decided—to hell with the past. To hell with everything but us," but neither in the novel nor the film do things work out that way.

In any case, even if Bailey or Kathie would like to forget, the "big operator" Sterling has an excellent and precise memory. As Bailey tells her, "You said it once, he [Sterling] can remember." Whit himself explains, "I always remember what any man did for me." His business operations depend on such exactitude.

The past, or more specifically, *past criminality*, counts heavily in Tourneur's film, to the extent of comprising in the form of a flashback fully one-third of the work—but is it merely personal history that moved and propelled the filmmakers? Certainly, most commentators on *Out of the Past* seem to think so.

In perceptive observations on Tourneur's career, published in his *Amis Américains* [ *American Friends*, 1993, a study of postwar Hollywood directors], French director and, before that, critic Bertrand Tavernier writes: "In Tourneur's best films there is a mysterious, miraculous accord between sound and image, between the whispers disrupted by certain violent effects and the objects that surround them. This accord, this osmosis favors the uncertainties, the ambiguities, the fears and the nightmares and give these films this shadow element that makes them inimitable."

In a 1971 essay, Tavernier termed Tourneur's approach "at the same time modest and personal, devoid of pretension, and, however, absolutely original." Speaking of Tourneur's use of sound, the French critic wrote that one had the impression that his films were horrifying tales "where the silences take on fundamental importance, where the rhythm of the voices, the music of the words create a unique and, if possible, gentle frequency."

Although no one has ever suggested, to our knowledge, that Tourneur possessed a left-wing point of view, his empathy for African Americans in the US indicates a compassion that generally animates the films. He told

Tavernier in a 1971 interview, “I always refused ... to caricature blacks. I never, or almost never, depicted them as domestics [servants]. I always tried to give them a profession, to have them speak normally, without going for any comic effect.” There is a night-club scene in *Out of the Past* that underscores this point.

Tavernier’s comments are poetic and thoughtful. However, he too, although a man of the left, sees *Out of the Past* purely in terms of individual, private history. He argues, legitimately, that Tourneur’s art consists in evoking “the invisible, showing us ‘the things behind the things’”—but what are those things that are “unknown” and “latent”?

The commentators are not simply being obtuse. On a first viewing, the romanticism of the relationships and locales in this “annihilating melodrama” (critic Andrew Sarris) is intoxicating. *Out of the Past* is intensely intimate and personal, and affecting. On further viewings, however, one begins to sense that the “things behind the things” involve more than simply the fate of these individuals.

If one is dealing with serious, thinking artistic figures, how can one avoid considering the historical conditions under which a given work was created? Considering the weight of “past criminality” in regard to a film shot and edited in 1946 should bring to mind the greatest crimes of the 20th century, those of the Nazi regime, whose perpetrators had just stood trial. Beyond that, of course, there were the crimes committed by the Allied forces as well, in Dresden and Tokyo and Hiroshima.

The headline in every American newspaper September 30 and October 1, 1946 carried the news of the conviction and sentencing of the Hitler regime’s leading war criminals. The international court had rejected the argument of the defendants that they could not help what they had done, that they had merely followed the orders of a superior. The filming of *Out of the Past* began in October 1946.

The somberness and seriousness, the urgency and intensity, of the film’s images and drama, we would argue, had to come from a deeper source than the immediate facts of a crime drama.

It is not necessarily a question of the deliberate intent of anyone involved in the making of the film to register the world-historical atrocities. But these events and their implications were “in the air.” The intuitive artist’s antenna picks up all sorts of signals from the surrounding atmosphere and adapts them to his or her own purposes, often in a relatively unconscious fashion.

(It is worth noting that the hero of *The Phenix City Story*—made eight years later on the subject of organized crime’s domination of a small Alabama city and co-written by Mainwaring—is a former prosecutor at the Nuremberg trials. Film historian John McCarty argues, a little loosely, that the work “is a mirror of World War II, the Holocaust, and the communist witchhunt era of McCarthyism.”)

Moreover, too many American films appeared around this time that took up (in quite varied ways) the theme of the inescapability of past misdeeds and attachments, including *The Stranger* (Orson Welles, 1946) and *The Killers* (Robert Siodmak, 1946), more distantly, *I Walk Alone* (Byron Haskin, 1948), *Criss Cross* (Siodmak, 1949) and *Kansas City Confidential* (Karlson, 1952)—perhaps even the earlier *Shadow of a Doubt* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1943)—and others, to make this a coincidence. Of course, that the American film industry for the most part would or could not address *directly* the traumatic issues of the time, including the most titanic events of the century, speaks to the limitations of corporate-owned, profit-making and heavily censored film production. The writers, directors and performers found themselves constrained along so many lines.

Because of the artistry and integrity of those involved, because they rose to the occasion, as it were, *Out of the Past* permits the viewer to experience both the immediate drama, which has its great charms and fascinations, and, at the same time, recognize the presence, which shines through the imagery, of another, even more resonant level of meaning.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**