

Out of the Past

By Stephanie Zacharek

"The B List: The National Society of Film Critics on the Low-Budget Beauties, Genre-Bending Mavericks, and Cult Classics We Love"

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In the world of noir, finding love with a nice girl means nothing; it's obsession — which electrifies and overstimulates the soul, spoiling it for anything as pedestrian and comfortable as marital love — that rules the day. In Jacques Tourneur's "Out of the Past" — one of the greatest noirs, among the most unsparing and the most bleakly beautiful — the femme fatale is actually the femme *domestique*. Robert Mitchum's Jeff Markham has escaped a crooked past to build a new life as a mechanic in a small, placid town. There he's found a girl he loves, and he truly does love her, with a deeply touching, gentlemanly dutiful decency. Virginia Huston's Ann seems to be a fine enough match for him, an intelligent young woman who doesn't recoil when Jeff's secrets begin to seep into daylight. Instead, she urges him to talk to her, to tell her everything about the man he was before he met her: she's tough enough to take it, bolstered by a womanly, and not wholly unrealistic, belief that providing shelter and support and understanding is the key to earning a man's love.

And so Jeff begins his story, about a treacherous but irresistible creature named Kathie (Jane Greer), whom he first saw in a café in Acapulco, a faux-angelic vision in a white dress and a saucer-shaped halo of a hat. He's tough and smart, and he knows better than to believe the lies she feeds him; the problem is that her treachery is actually the ultimate truth, so raw in its hungry calculation, its overt sexual dominance, that it isn't really a lie at all.

The disparity between the nice girl and the dangerous one is a linchpin of film noir: the good girl seems good enough, until the bad one comes along. And so in "Out of the Past," Ann seems so terrifically nice, such a great girl to settle down with, until we get an eyeful of Kathie — appraising, predatory, so casually confident that her magnetism rivals the pull of the North Pole. Kathie doesn't have to work hard to be bad; she comes by it naturally, which makes her a woman without artifice. Her sin-dappled soul is as naked as her ambition.

And so in this twisted mirror world, Ann, the seemingly safe choice, the woman who has no desire for jewels, power, and dough, and who, unlike Kathie, would never dream of putting a bullet into another human being, is the dangerous one. Her infinite understanding and patience will come with a price:



she'll want Jeff home with her in the evenings; she'll want babies, a family — she wants only to give life, not take it.

But can we picture Mitchum's Jeff in that setting, trundling home in his coveralls after a hard day's work, washing his hands in the sink, dandling a baby on his knee? We can't — because he's most alive to us in that faintly rumpled trench coat, his tipped fedora only partly shading those perpetually half-doubting, half-believing-everything eyes. In the hushed, velvety, black-and-white universe of film noir — a bitterly poetic landscape of desiring and not getting, compared with the false cheer of the real-life postwar world, in which GIs returned to put their noses to the grindstone in pursuit of happiness, prosperity, and the building of families — domestic bliss is life-sapping. In "Out of the Past," it's Kathie who gives Jeff context, and thus everlasting life.

And so Kathie's cruelty is a kind of generosity. Jeff first yields to her, accepting, and then tries to resist, only to realize he can't escape her. Greer and Mitchum are perfectly matched here, partly because Mitchum — a man we think of as an indelible symbol of masculinity — is so submissive to her, even against his better judgment. In a pivotal scene in which Kathie shoots one of Jeff's old colleagues, he turns around in horror to face her, the gun still hot in her hand; her ruthlessness is a cruel surprise. Later — after he's supposedly left her behind, eager to begin his life with Ann — he sees her again, although he recoils from her, it's as if she's breathing life into him once again, a goddess of both destruction and rebirth. Recognizing what she is, in all its terrible splendor, repulses him, but it also sets something alight in him.

Mitchum was around thirty at the time the picture was made, and his youthful beauty is resplendent. (Even in the last years

of his life, his face kept its aura of boyish vulnerability, although later you had to look a littler harder for it.) In “Out of the Past,” his vulnerability is practically luminous. That’s partly because of the way he’s lit: as with all the great noirs, the movie’s surface (the cinematographer is Nicholas Musuraca) is so tactile that if you were unlucky enough to suffer a horrible blinding accident tomorrow, you could easily summon the contours of Mitchum’s faces as if they were sculpture.

But what makes the performance so wrenching is the way Mitchum mingles that searching, open quality with skepticism. The last thing he wants is to be taken in — the sensible downward curve of his mouth clues us in to his resolve — and yet he knows it’s gong to happen anyway. And how could he resist Greer’s Kathie? At first her lips look all wrong, a bit too big for her face, borrowed — or stolen from some other woman. But scene by scene, we get used to them, until they’re nothing but bewitching. Greer’s eyes have that dewy, melting quality, but not the kind of melting that suggests she’s going weak at the knees. Their softness is a riddle, a dare. Come on in, the water’s fine. They’re welcoming eyes, bidding the dreamer to nestle deep inside this dream of a dame.

Jeff tries to find his way out of her strong undersea grasp., into a life of security, respectability, and love, the life Jeff would have built with Ann. Is it tragic that he’s unable to do it? The movie’s ending is tragic, but what makes “Out of the Past” so unsettling is that even its somber resolution suggests that Jeff has averted a greater tragedy. Love can sustain you for a lifetime, or it can be mere life support. From the moment Jeff met Kathie, he was of no use to anyone else. She’s the woman who makes him most alive. She’s the killer inside him.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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