

Movie review on out of the past (1947) directed by: jacques tourneur

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



Analysis: “ Out of the Past”

Out of the Past is one of the classics of the American film noir genre, starring Robert Mitchum, Jane Greer and Kirk Douglas in one of the classic twisted plots that is a hallmark of this milieu. Joe Stephanos is searching for Jeff Bailey, who has enamored local girl Ann Miller, but who has also attracted the suspicions of the law – and of Ann’s father. Stephanos finds Bailey and takes him to see Whit Sterling, who has been hunting for him, over a matter of \$40, 000. Bailey and one of his former loves had swindled Sterling out of the money – but then the girl had left Bailey without any of the cash. Sterling gives Bailey a chance to set things right, but it turns out (as one might expect in a noir film) to be a setup. While the plot is compelling, though, it is the artistic elements of the movie, such as lighting, scenery, characterization and dialogue that express the film’s themes.

When it comes to typical character types associated with film noir, the deadly woman is one that appears in Out of the Past. Kathie Moffat is the prototypical “ bitch-goddess” character that dates all the way back to Lady Macbeth and to Homer’s Circe. She is a cold-blooded killer and thief, even more explicitly treacherous than Whit Sterling. While Bailey and Sterling are also as likely as not to stab one in the back, they appear to have some sort of honor code at their moral center, whereas Kathie does not. After all, even after Kathie has shot Sterling and robbed his money, Sterling is willing to take her back, and their connection seems to be a bit deeper than simple lust for the attractive femme fatale. There are those who suggest that this ruthless woman typifies what some thought would happen when women

entered professions that had traditionally employed men after the Second World War. By leaving the domestic sphere behind, these women could lose all of their respect for social mores, and such characters as Moffat in this movie, as well as Ann Savage from *Detour* and Peggy Cummins from *Gun Crazy* typified a violent hatred of others that came with virulent narcissism.

One of the hallmarks of film noir is the use of shadow to completely cover characters' faces and bodies. At times, the shadows can even distort a character's appearance completely. While there are other filmmakers who use this technique throughout their noir pieces, in *Out of the Past*, Tourneur only uses this when emotions require emphasis. At those points, the shadowing brings in an affective aura to the film that adds to the overall darkness. There are other examples of noir in which this use of shadow goes to excess, as in such examples as Anthony Mann's *T-Men* and Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil*, when shadow appears in *Out of the Past*, emotions are at a head, and the shadows send those emotions pouring into the audience's consciousness.

At times, the shadowy objects in the film take on meaning of a symbolic nature. While symbolism is not a feature in most noir films, with the exception of several of the works of Alfred Hitchcock, in *Out of the Past*, there are several objects that would apply. When we see Bailey and Ann together, near the beginning of the film, there appears to be a thorny bush between them. As the scene progresses, the shadows from this thorny bush appear on Ann's face, as the lighting gets behind the bush. Later in the film, when Bailey returns to gather Ann, and the two of them are in the forest,

there are once again branches with thorns between them; this time, the shadows from the thorny branches cover both of their faces. While the symbolic meaning of the thorn is certainly open to interpretation, the difficult fates that both of these characters have before them in the film could be seen as the outcome of their own particular “ thorns to bear.” The pessimistic outlook that these thorns give to the scene is also typical of film noir, and the shadowy details paint a fate of suffering on their faces.

When one considers the element of film noir that has to do with dialogue and action, while the plot does move forward in a chronological direction, it is the use of flashback that serves as the engine of that plot. There are very few heroes of film noir that look to the future; instead, they tend to live one day at a time, focusing on memories of the past to sustain them, rather than hopes for a bright future. When failure comes in the present, the noir hero will regress to memories of the past to take away the pain that comes from contemplating the present. And so the dominant themes in dialogue and characterization in film noir revolve around nostalgia, loss and insecurity, all soaked in an atmosphere of self-doubt. The relationship between Bailey and Ann typifies the noir idea of relationships - one grounded in a sensual connection guaranteed to last as long as that physical attraction is not subsumed by the opportunity for one to betray the other. The fact that neither Ann's father nor the local law enforcement approves of the relationship shows that this is not going to be a happy, fulfilling relationship for either of them over time. For the present, though, the thrill is enough for her - and pessimism is a way of life for him.

In many ways, what happened in film in the 1940s and 1950s would typify similar changes in television in the early twentieth century. What made film noir such a shock was the insistence on unhappy endings, on a refusal to provide an easy ending that would wrap ends up nicely, with a moral. There is no character in *Out of the Past* who would ever say, for example, that “there’s no place like home.” The idea that stories should resolve nicely and neatly, with a lesson, stayed with television well through the 1990’s; as the twenty-first century opened, though, and sitcoms like *Married: With Children* and *The Simpsons* began to tear down the idea of the mandatory happy ending. Shows such as *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, *Law & Order*, and their spinoffs began to focus more on the darker elements of crime as their *raison d’etre*, rather than providing lessons and morals to the audience, as earlier crime shows such as *Adam-12* and *T. J. Hooker* did. Instead, the focus was on the evil at work; the show *Criminal Minds* appears to have pushed this trend as far as it can on network television, and while such shows as *Flashpoint* indicate that there may be a move back towards crime programming with a lesson for the audience, *Justified*, *Southland* and *Breaking Bad* indicate that the limits have not yet been reached in cable channels. The sheer artistry of the noir films, though, has yet to follow the fatalistic plots onto the small screen, and it is that artistry that gives the genre its worth.