

THE BAD AND THE BEAUTIFUL

By Michael Ventura

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“Wait a minute, I know this place. I’ve seen that courthouse.”

I had not driven that road, but I knew that town.

We were on U.S. 395 heading south from Lake Tahoe. To the west the High Sierra rose like a great jagged wall. To the east, the earth sloped down to Nevada’s wastelands. But in this pretty valley, neither desert nor mountain, lay this pretty town: Bridgeport, California.

The courthouse dates from 1880, and its architecture embodied much that America aspired to be: beautifully made, orderly, and free. The town’s buildings are a hodgepodge of styles now, but still you feel what was intended here: a quiet place where one could live simply and normally, safe and sound, while beyond these horizons the world carried on it pleased.

In 1947, director Jacques Tourneur picked Bridgeport’s normalcy for the central location of my favorite film, the toughest film noir of all, *Out of the Past*.

That Victorian courthouse was in many shots, standing for the sense of order that this film is intent on violating. Robert Mitchum’s gas station was right across the street. Ann (Virginia Huston), the pure embodiment of American womanhood whom he tried to love, lived in a house not far off, as did her upright childhood sweetheart, Jim (Richard Webb).

In the film, the town is rightly suspicious of Mitchum’s Jeff – all but Ann, and Jeff’s tough teenage friend, Dickie Moore (credited simply as “The Kid”), who is deaf and dumb but no one’s fool. Jeff is trying outrun his past, but that past is destined to drive up that road in the person of a hood named Joe (Paul Valentine). In Joe’s wake are the criminal gambler Whit (Kirk Douglas) and Kathie (that’s how she spells it), played by the inimitable Jane Greer. Of all the femmes fatales in all the joints in all the world, Jane Greer’s Kathie is the most feminine and most fatal.

Tournuer’s casting adheres strictly to the iconography of film noir, the genre that cuts through the cant of America’s idealism to tell the world that the safe and the good are pretty and dull, while the bad and the beautiful are deep and doomed.

Sooner or later anyone passionate about cinema makes her or his list of greatest noirs. On that list you’ll always find the thinly cloaked Oedipal conundrums of *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*; the humorless but brilliantly staged pretensions of *Chinatown* and *Vertigo*; the image worship of *Laura*; the obsessions of *In a Lonely Place* and *The Strange Loves of Martha Ivers*; the relishing of self-destruction that seethes through *The Lady from Shanghai*, *Touch of Evil*, *Humoresque*, and *Mildred Pierce*; the stylish winking at fate of *The Big Sleep* and *The Maltese Falcon*; the intensity for intensity’s sake of *Morocco* and *Shanghai Express*; the weary but game resignation of *Murder, My Sweet* and *Farewell My Lovely*. Noir lists vary with temperament, but none worthy of the name excludes *Out of the Past*, the toughest and least compromising noir of all.

Rather than ruin the film for those who have yet to see it, let’s speak of what might be called the “noir ethic” that *Out of the Past* exemplifies so stylishly.

I love *Out of the Past* best because rippling through writer Geoffrey Holmes’ dialogue is a laconic sense of humor resigned to absurdity and contemptuous of sham.

Greer plays roulette as Mitchum watches. He tells her, "That isn't the way to play it."
"Why not?" says she.

"Cause it isn't a way to win."

"Is there a way to win?"

"Well, there's a way to lose more slowly."

Noir assumes we're born to lose, but if we're savvy, we may lose on our own terms. Losing is a given. What notion could be more un-American?

Webb says to Mitchum: "I was going to kill you."

Mitchum shrugs: "Who isn't?"

Noir takes for granted that the world is run by thugs. Always was, always will be. In noir, history is thuggery. You're on one side of a gun or the other, but there's always a gun.

Greer tells Mitchum: "You're no good for anyone but me. You're no good and neither am I. That's why we deserve each other."

Noir's characters hate themselves without qualification, but wedded to their self-hate is a fierce, irreducible pride. How can self-contempt coexist with self-respect? You won't find the answer in self-help books, but you'll see it in *Out of the Past*. Noir's people degrade themselves with abandon, but they won't let anyone push them around.

Noir takes for granted that the actions of its heroes and heroines do not matter except to them. They don't need hope; they don't need God; they don't need meaning. They need nothing but the honesty of a frank look in the mirror.

In noir, hope never pans out, God never helps, and meaning always turns absurd. Noir's characters live and die on their capacity to face themselves.

Fear is a given. Mitchum tells Greer, "I've been afraid of half the things I ever did." But fear doesn't stop him or any of the bad and beautiful of noir.

Noir isn't about the courage of Westerns. Noir defines courage as a high pitch of desperation.

Greer asks Mitchum, "Can we get away with it?"

His answer: "Let's find out."

Many pages have been written about noir's femmes fatales, most of them drivel. If history is thuggery, if to make history is to be some kind of thug, and if thuggery is the province of outwardly heterosexual males, it follows that a female who wants a piece of the action must out-finesse and out-thug all sorts of male hoods. A femme fatale was merely a woman willing to best men at their own games.

If men were suckers for beauty, that meant men were suckers, period. Greer tells Mitchum: "I never told you I was anything but what I am – you just wanted to imagine I was."

His fate is sealed by his own imagination.

But her fate, too, is sealed by hers. Unwittingly, she's bought into the all-American notion that there's always a way to win.

Noir says: Not always. Hardly ever.

In noir, even winning is a kind of losing. Noir echoes Ernest Hemingway's epigram in *Winner Take Nothing*: "Unlike all other forms of lutte or combat the conditions are that winner shall take nothing; neither his ease, nor his pleasure, nor any notions of glory; nor, if he win far enough, shall there be any reward within himself."

That is pure noir. In the great noir films, when “The End” scrolls up, everything has been attempted and nothing has been gained.

Nothing but this: The characters have gone as deep into their souls as they can go.

Noir usually gives its bad and beautiful characters the best lines, while goodie-goodies mouth platitudes. But *Out of the Past* is honest enough to give a goodie-goodie her say.

Mitchum tells his Miss America, Virginia Huston, “You know, maybe I was wrong and luck is like love – you have to go all the way to find it.”

“You do to keep it,” says his Miss America.

Going all the way. That is how noir tells us to find ourselves, while it insists on this caveat: Be prepared not to like what you find – and don’t let that stop you.

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