CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Dark journeys: Jacques Tourneur's Experiment Perilous
Authors	Young, Gwenda
Publication date	2010-06-01
Original Citation	Young, G. (2010) Dark journeys: Jacques Tourneur's Experiment Perilous, La Furia Umana, (5). [Online]
Type of publication	Article (non peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	http://www.lafuriaumana.it/index.php/archives/52-lfu-5
Rights	© 2010, Gwenda Young.
Download date	2026-09-16 09:50:20
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/2942

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Published June 2010, www.lafuriaumana.it

Dark Journeys: Jacques Tourneur's *Experiment Perilous*

A train; a thunderstorm; a fateful encounter; thus begins for Huntingdon Bailey 'the strangest days of my life'. Like many Tourneur protagonists, Bailey (George Brent) is, seemingly, a man of science and rational thought, lured, apparently by chance, into an entanglement with strange forces. Probing into the mysteries of the human mind, grappling with events and emotions that can neither be explained nor dismissed, *Experiment Perilous* is an exquisite gothic melodrama.

Released in December 1944, Tourneur's film fitted into a cycle of films classed by Mary Anne Doane as 'paranoid woman' films[1]. The template for this subgenre was *Gaslight*, the 1938 play by British playwright Patrick Hamilton that was brought to the screen in 1940 by Thorold Dickinson and, again, in 1944 by George Cukor. Set in Victorian England, *Gaslight* told the tale of an (apparently neurotic) woman, a virtual prisoner of her gothic mansion, slowly being driven mad by her (apparently sane) husband. It is only through the intervention of a Scotland Yard detective that the mystery is solved, the woman's neurosis explained, and the gold digging husband's villainy exposed. Hollywood recognised the appeal that such figures held for wartime audiences, and produced a number of films that centred on fragile female protagonists and dangerously attractive villains, against a backdrop of a domestic space rendered strange and uncanny. Indeed, such themes and representations were to be found earlier, for example in much of Hitchcock's work [*The Lodger; Suspicion; Rebecca; Shadow of a Doubt*], but certainly

became a staple of the woman's film in the 1940s. Thus, Andre de Toth's *Dark Waters* followed on from Cukor's *Gaslight*, and paved the way for *Experiment Perilous*; *Dragonwyck*; *Undercurrent; Sleep, My Love;* and *Secret Beyond the Door*.

Interestingly, many of the key entries in the cycle were made by European directors at relatively early stages of their Hollywood careers. De Toth, Lang and Sirk (as well as American directors such as Minnelli and Mankiewicz) were familiar with the mobile camerawork and chiaroscuro lighting of German Expressionism, while Tourneur had also absorbed his father's theories on lighting and composition. This interest in shading –in both an aesthetic sense (light and dark) and a philosophical one (knowledge, interpretation)-made them ideal choices to direct films that centred on the themes of perception, investigation, and scepticism.

The narrative structure of *Experiment Perilous*, like many Tourneur films, is complex and revealing: as Paul Willemen, Phil Hardy and Chris Fujiwara have noted[2], the tale told is dominated by flashbacks, mainly narrated (and visually imagined) by Bailey.
It is, therefore, fitting that in a film that problematises point of view and suggests the limits of rational certainties, Tourneur uses the setting of a train, hurtling through the dark, stormy night, to open the tale. Where else but on a train could this 'dark journey' begin? Aside from the sexual connotations of the locomotive, it obviously functions as an instrument of modernity, aligning it with Bailey's rational outlook (he is approached by Cissie (Olive Blakeney), for reassurance that the machine will conquer the storm). Yet, paradoxically, it is this symbol of modernity and technology that facilitates a journey into

the past that seems almost dreamlike. In a way, it is a metaphor for the film viewing experience: just as the viewer (and dreamer) cedes control when they enter the cinema, so too does the passenger hand themselves over to technology when they board a train.

In these train scenes Tourneur establishes the complexities (and ambiguities) of Bailey's position as narrator. While the dreamlike quality of Bailey's first encounter with the fluttery Cissie is somewhat diminished by Bailey's voiceover -he wonders if Cissie is "mentally ill", raising the spectre of mental illness that so haunts the film- Tourneur's decision to frame Bailey and Cissie against a muddy compartment window is revealing. A window obscured by mud (by the elements of Nature) gives only a partial view: it serves as a succinct metaphor for the limited viewpoint offered by Bailey for the remainder of the film. The train compartment also allows Tourneur a perfect setting in which to plant hints at his dynamic and symbolic handling of space throughout the film. As a public space, the compartment facilitates the chance encounter between Cissie and Bailey, two strangers forced together through circumstance. Yet this public space is also transformed, domesticated, perhaps *feminised,* by the intrusion of Cissie, who carries her own special tea, imagines Bailey (whom she has only just met) as her 'first friend' (shades of Irena from *Cat People* here), and thinks nothing of crossing the line into Bailey's privacy. Note also the clutter and *softness* of the compartment, a small scale simulation of a Victorian drawing room that might even anticipate the gothic Bederaux mansion 'the only place in town where you're not sure what century you're living in'.

Soon after this intriguing opening Cissie conveniently exits the narrative, thereafter existing only in the words of her diary, that will, like the mysterious parchment in *Curse of the Demon*, find its way back to our main protagonist. Through interpreting (and visualising) Cissie's story, Bailey takes control of the narrative, but this, after all, is a Tourneur narrative and the alert viewer will recognise the elements of fantasy and conjecture that are threaded through it. For, if nothing else, *Experiment Perilous* is a film about interpretation and its limits; about the impossibility of definitively explaining the most mysterious elements of our world (the human mind; sexuality; desire).

Central to the mystery that Bailey attempts to unravel is the figure of Allida, played by Hedy Lamarr. *Experiment Perilous* was adapted from a novel by a female novelist, Margaret Carpenter and, as with Vera Caspary's *Laura,* the key focus is less on the actual female than on the male narrator's construction of her. In short, the novels, as well as the films that were adapted from them, are mainly concerned with untangling the web of fetishisation that is spun by men who are threatened, enticed, baffled and repelled by the figure of woman. Even though Bailey is the nominal hero of the film, Tourneur (as Carpenter had done in her novel) suggests that his attitude to women is problematic at best: in an early scene he professes not to 'like beautiful women; it makes them nervous', subtly aligning him with Allida's husband, Nick (Paul Lukas). Just as Bailey associates female beauty with neurosis (and perhaps narcissism?), Nick sadistically punishes Allida for her beauty, her sexuality and her maternity by concocting a scheme to "expose" her neurosis, which is apparently "caused" by her over identification with her son and her suppression of her sexual desire for a would be suitor, Alec (George Neise).

Intriguingly, Bailey's pronouncement on beautiful women comes in a scene added in by Tourneur and screenwriter/producer Warren Duff. Soon after leaving Cissie at the train station, Bailey goes to the opening of a sculpture exhibition by his friend, Clag (Albert Dekker). Dominating the display is a massive bust of a beautiful woman represented as the Medusa, looming over the spectators. A female guest wryly notes 'I'm afraid that's the way he [Clag] sees us', a line that, like the bust, has double meaning: it acknowledges the inevitability and persistence of male representations of femininity, but also suggests the limits of that representation. Visually referencing the Medusa, a potent symbol of beauty and monstrous femininity, also establishes the film's main themes of the allure and the danger represented by the feminine. Tourneur chooses to position the bust in the foreground of several shots, metaphorically suggesting that the film will foreground the (male) crisis of representations of the feminine. Tellingly, in these shots the Medusa bust dwarfs the protagonists who are engaged in a conversation centred on determining the nature of woman, and it is while positioned in the shadows of the Medusa that Bailey makes his pronouncement on beautiful women, and is criticised by Clag for 'looking into the eyes of a beautiful woman and seeing only an inflamed cornea'. It's as if Tourneur is suggesting here that verbal discourse only skims the surface of meaning; that an overly rational/scientific approach is limited; and that the appearances are just representations.

Tourneur's foregrounding of the problematic nature of representation in this scene reveals a key anxiety of the film: how to represent the feminine. Indeed, in both *Laura* and *Experiment Perilous* (and the later *Vertigo*) the alluring female is endlessly talked

about and visualised—captured in the frame of a portrait- until at last she makes her appearance. In Preminger's film, Laura (Gene Tierney) is seemingly summoned from the dead after the detective, Mark McPherson (Dana Andrews) stares intently at her portrait, while Bailey, having heard of the 'beautiful Allida' from her sister-in-law, Cissie, seeks out her portrait at the Museum, only to be disappointed by its lack of vitality. While the portrait in Preminger's film shows Laura on display, striking a beautiful, seductive pose that seems to show her confidence in her own desirability and is alluring enough to drive McPherson to obsession, the portrait of Allida is more formal, the subject stiffer, trapped. Dressed as a (Victorian) matriarch, carrying out a domestic duty (serving tea), the portrait reveals Allida's confinement in a role that seems unnatural, at least to Bailey's eyes. Bailey's interpretation seems confirmed when he meets her in her drawing room- she is a (barely) living version of the portrait, encased in the same black dress (suggestive of Victorian mourning garb), serving tea in the same cups. Although Nick suggests that his wife is obsessed with preserving the pose and, implicitly, the role that was captured in the portrait, Allida reveals to Bailey that the pose (and role?) is all a charade, one that has been foisted upon her by her husband (who, it seems, is intent on recreating his lost mother). It is worth noting that Tourneur and his producer/screenwriter Warren Duff chose to change the period in which events take place, moving them from the contemporary setting of Carpenter's novel back to 1903, neatly locating it within a late Victorian milieu. This reimagining of the novel as a period piece makes more sense for the genre (many of the key entries in the 'paranoid woman' films were set in the past), as well as serving to enhance the film's portrayal of the domestic space as stifling, cluttered, claustrophobic.

Locating the events within a Victorian setting also taps into that period's constructions of gender roles and its perceived repression of sexuality. This concern is at the heart of the film: the variety of roles constructed for Allida, whether they be a Trilby like ingénue, a Victorian matriarch, an international, desirable beauty, or a child-woman associated with nature, are just that; roles, projected onto a woman that seems devoid of any sense of herself. Allida remains passive and malleable throughout and indeed the sense that she is merely a beautiful cipher is enhanced by Lamarr's performance. And yet, how can Allida be otherwise, the film seems to suggest. There is no doubt that her identity is firmly bound up with men: from her father who gives her over to Nick, who then moulds and sadistically punishes her, to Alec who pursues her in the hope of awakening her sexual desire, finally to Bailey who promises to understand her and restore her to a "natural", idyllic state of being. The decision to use the same impossibly romanticised, naïve visual style to shoot the scenes in which the 'child' Allida is removed from her "natural state" by Nick and, later, restored to it by Bailey subtly aligns both men, and relates, perhaps, to Tourneur's determination to view happy endings with scepticism. Indeed, is there a Tourneur film with an unproblematic happy ending?

There are other Tourneur elements in *Experiment Perilous:* as in many of his key films there is, as noted, a concern with the difficulty of interpretation, and the deceptiveness of appearances. Just as the glittering sea appeals to Betsy's sense of romance and beauty in *I Walked with a Zombie*, the truth is often revealed to be more brutal and disturbing (the glitter of the sea, she is told, is 'the glitter of putrescence'). Allida may live a seemingly

privileged, cosseted existence in her luxurious brownstone, but it is a life of suppression and entrapment. While the film is set in 1903, the interior of the house suggests the nineteenth century. As noted, the house on Murray hill is 'the only place in town where you're not sure what century you're living in'; the sense of arrested development, of emotional retardation (of Nick, frozen in his childhood, but also of Allida who has gone from child-woman to apparently neurotic mother) is cleverly conveyed. The bric-a-brac that clutters up the house may be a mere detail of interior design that locates the film more realistically in the late Victorian era, but, more sinisterly, it represents a refusal to let go of the past, just as Nick cannot let go of his traumatic childhood, choosing to relive it through his punishment of his wife /mother substitute. Indeed, the Victorian mania for collecting here finds its logical conclusion: Allida is the prize jewel in Nick's collection. Even Cissie recognises that the house is weighed down by a dark family history of emotional deprivation and male hysteria (Nick's father killed himself and Nick is ultimately revealed as the true hysteric)[3] ; she tells Bailey that she intends to live a (rootless?) life in an anonymous hotel (more shades of *Cat People* here but, like Irena, Cissie is dragged down by history.)

The symbolism of water is important in many Tourneur films, as it is in psychoanalytical readings of femininity and maternity. As noted, the sea signifies death and decay in *I Walked with a Zombie*; a river becomes a site of murder in both *Canyon Passage* and *Out of the Past;* while in *Stars in my Crown* water (the poisoned well) both sustains and endangers life. Water is often associated with identity and femininity, too: in *Cat People*

Irena attempts to cleanse herself of her primal nature by immersing herself in a bathtub (which, alas, has cat claw feet), and later preys on Alice in the swimming pool.
The water motif is also present in *Experiment Perilous* and is a neat symbol for the film's fascination with identity, femininity and the deceptiveness of appearances. In one of the flashback scenes, when Bailey is reading Cissie's account of Nick's marriage proposal to Allida and visualising the events, Tourneur frames Allida as she gazes in a pool of water. As she accepts Nick's proposal, thus 'sealing her fate', she brushes her hand over the surface of the pool, effectively erasing her image, and, implicitly, her identity. Similarly, the huge aquariums that line the walls of the mansion act as a visual metaphor for Allida's position: like a beautiful, exotic fish, she is 'suspended', enclosed in the gothic mansion, and in Nick's construction of her. The climax of the film, in which the aquariums are shattered by the gas explosion, is not merely staged for dramatic effect, but, rather, functions as a summation of the water motif that Tourneur has explored throughout. The explosion of the aquariums is a kind of release, a rebirth, for Allida, but like the sacrificed fish, it comes with an element of danger: for Allida is now set to embark on her own new journey, entering a partnership with Bailey, but it remains unclear whether she will be allowed to construct an identity of her own.

The uneasiness with which Tourneur ends the film is apparent in the final scene when Allida is confronted by the detective investigating the explosion at the house. When the detective attempts to give a name to Nick's neurosis ('criminally insane'), to neatly tie up the loose ends and contain the complexities of the disturbed human mind, he is shyly dismissed by Allida. It is Allida, the subject of so much investigation and interpretation,

who senses the inadequacies of language and science in understanding a man such as Nick. While Allida remains frustratingly passive throughout the film, it is in this final scene that she reveals a degree of depth, and perhaps *becomes* more of a Tourneur heroine (Irena in *Cat People,* Betsy in *I Walked with a Zombie*; both sense the limits of rational discourse). The happy ending that sees Allida located within the frame of an airy, bright Vermont farmhouse, cast as a 'good witch' by Bailey's narrative, may be just that: a reassuring conclusion, but, as this is a Tourneur film, perhaps there is room for ambiguity…

(2,771words)

---

[1] See Doane, Mary Anne. *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s*. Bloomington: University of Indiana press, 1987.

[2] See Willemen, Paul. "Notes Towards the Construction of Readings of Tourneur" in *Jacques Tourneur* ed. Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen Edinburgh: Edinburgh Film Festival, 1975; Hardy, Phil. "Experiment Perilous". *The Listener*. 15. Jan. 1987, p.27; Fujiwara, Chris. *Jacques Tourneur: The Cinema of Nightfall*. Jefferson: McFarland, 1998.

[3] Intriguingly, Tourneur was interested in making a film about the nineteenth century neurologist, J.M Charcot, the man who 'discovered' and theorised male hysteria, and had a deep interest in hypnosis.