

Deadly talent

by [Christina Bieber Lake](#) in the [March 22, 2000](#) issue

The Talented Mr. Ripley (1999), directed by Anthony Minghella

Though it's set in the 1950s, not the '20s, *The Talented Mr. Ripley* feels at first like a reincarnation of an F. Scott Fitzgerald novel. Dickie Greenleaf is a Princeton graduate who lives decadently in Italy, surrounded by jazz and supported by his father's money. Tom Ripley is a bit like Jay Gatsby--he can enter this world of wealth only as a spectator or an interloper. But while Fitzgerald built sympathy for his characters' tragic destinies, this film asks us to root for a sociopathic killer's ingenious escape from the consequences of his actions. Nick Carraway had a heart and Gatsby a soul; Tom Ripley has nothing but talent.

The story begins when Ripley, who is living on odd jobs in New York, borrows a jacket with the Princeton insignia in order to play the piano at a reception. When Dickie Greenleaf's father approaches Ripley, assuming that Ripley had attended the university with his son, Ripley seizes the opportunity to become someone else. He puts on a fake identity as easily as he had the jacket, and Greenleaf hires Ripley to go to Italy to try to convince his son to return home.

Imitation is Ripley's primary talent. He is, as one character describes him, a "quick study." He learns about jazz in order to befriend Dickie, who is obsessed with it. Jazz is the primary motif for Dickie's world: he lives a golden boy's life of improvised play, keeping an American girlfriend while he pursues Italian women on the side.

Because Dickie is all play, without a moral core, Ripley's life assumes the desperate and pathetic shape of an imitation of an imitation. Ripley's erotic desire for Dickie becomes confused with his envy for Dickie's seemingly perfect life.

Ripley's lies and his own passions lead him to murder, and he becomes increasingly miserable, longing for some kind of authenticity. His desire for an authentic relationship eventually leads him to consider telling the truth. Meeting "someone special," he says, makes you want to reveal everything: "All you want to do is toss them the key and invite them to come inside, but you can't, because it is dark and there are demons. . . . I keep wanting to do that, fling the door open, let the light in

and clean the place out." But he can't do it.

The film may be taken as an argument for how the repression of homoerotic desire leads to inauthenticity and death. But Ripley's desire to erase himself feels more like an acknowledgment that he never had a real self to begin with. He has intelligence and visceral desires but no core, no seat of "emotions organized by trained habit into stable sentiments," as C. S. Lewis put it. The final shot of Ripley is taken from inside the dark cabin of a boat, a place that represents the darkness in which he remains.

That image recalls the opening credits, when the camera pans Ripley's face as it emerges from behind a dark, jagged screen. The title line at first appears with an empty space where the word "talented" should be. Several adjectives displayed in different fonts and colors--including "mysterious," "yearning," "passionate," "lonely," "troubled," "haunted" and "gifted"--shuffle through the spot until the word "talented" settles in. Ripley's identity is as unstable and fluid as language. Ripley cannot achieve an authentic self because he is caught in an infinite chain of signifying adjectives, a movement generated only by play and desire. From such movement there is no escape.

That is why "talented" finally is the best adjective to describe Ripley and, perhaps, other Americans trapped by a culture devoted to the creation of insatiable desires. Talent is as morally unassigned as technology: it can be used for evil or for good--or just for play.