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Film Appreciation 1310

16 October 2009

“Sea of Love”

“Sea of Love” is a crime drama / thriller movie featuring Detective Frank Keller (Al Pacino) and Detective Sherman (John Goodman). They must solve the mystery of who is murdering men from the want ads. The two don’t initially start working together until they both meet at a police banquet and there they discover their cases might be in common. They agree to work together and decide the best way to try to catch this murderer is to pose as single guys and place a want ad in the paper. Then they meet the thirty or forty women at a restaurant and offer them something to drink. The woman take a drink and the detectives collect their finger prints on the glass, which they can then cross reference to prints left at the crime scenes. All was working out well until they meet Helen Cruger (Ellen Barkin) and she slips away without leaving any prints (although Keller notices there is a chemical attraction between the two). Later on they bump into each other and instead of taking Sherman’s advice and leave her alone, Keller decides to get romantically involved to the point he doesn’t want to accept the fact she could be the killer and could kill him at any time.

The focus of this movie was on the sound and dialog. This movie is filled with simple dialog, matching dialog New York cops likely would have used. Intermixed with the dialog are sound effects of New York City and background music that matches the emotions on screen. The sound effects never over power the dialog or music. They are there in the background and after a while, tend to blend in and help sell the idea you are in New York City. Regarding which is most important, the supervising sound editor for “Sea of Love” Norval Crutcher said, “The dialogue. Sound effects and backgrounds are only enhancements to the movie. The dialog-that’s what we go to the movies for.” The dialog is simple and quick, and a number of times, witty too. For example:

**Det. Frank Keller**: Last time, she walked. Maybe this time I can get prints.   
**Det. Sherman**: Yeah right. What are ya gonna do, Frank? Send your dick to the lab? Man, that'll be a hell of a story in court. "Well, Your Honor, first I whipped it out, then she whipped it out, if you know what I mean."

Dialog is mostly synchronous in this movie, but there are several scenes where it is asynchronous. For example, Keller and Sherman are interviewing a third man who placed a rhyming ad in the paper. They believe he might have already contacted the killer. They interview him for information and while he is talking, the camera stays on Keller for a moment so the audience can see how determined Keller to solve this mystery.

The movie used “unusual emphasis on sound” . Specifically, there was a scene were Keller comes home late to his apartment. He leaves the elevator and is about to turn to his apartment and hears a noise (off camera). It sounds like glass breaking. Maybe a window broke and a thug might be near by. The images on the screen are dark and the sound is quiet. The suspense is growing. Keller turns towards a window and peers out. With exaggerated volume, a bunch of pigeons are startled and take flight, which in effect, startles both the character and the audience.

The movie’s music is focused on the song, “Sea of Love” by Phil Phillips and George Khoury. It is used like a plot device, to help build suspense. The song is a predominant clue to the killer. Since each time there is a murder, a record player is playing this song. To add to the mystery, the killer has chosen the record format versus the other more popular formats of the day. The use of this song allows the plot to move along. Keller and Sherman can verify they are likely going after the same killer when they discover each of their victims had this song playing. When Keller investigates Helen, he discovers she has a copy of the same record in her collection. Could she be the killer? Both Keller and the audience wonders. The song is also ironic in that the characters are looking for love in some way and while searching (the desperate settling on placing an expensive ad in the paper to look for love), there is a predator feeding off of those who are lonely, a sea of love.

Another interesting aspect to the use of music was the scene where Keller was at Sherman’s daughter’s wedding. The band is playing a song and everyone can be seen dancing and having fun. The camera slowly pans over to Keller and he is sitting at a table, thinking. The music being played by the band slowly fades out and the song, “Sea of Love” starts to fade in. Keller doesn’t say anything, but the audience can tell Keller is thinking about the crime scene and how to catch the murder. It seems the music here has a couple purposes. One, it could be a transitional element, as the sound is slowly faded out; the view of the wedding diminishes and goes to Keller. As it goes to Keller, the sound of “Sea of Love” fades in. As “Sea of Love” is playing, Sherman stops by. This is when Keller has his idea on how to catch the killer and presents it to Sherman. At this point, the music returns to the wedding band and reminds the audience we are back to reality. The “Sea of Love” song, used here, is played with no dialog or any significant clues on screen. Since it transitions from the wedding song to “Sea of Love”, the audience can figure out this is an objective view of Keller and what he is likely thinking about.

Overall, the film was entertaining. Mechanically, the film was good. The sounds were excellent and it was easy to believe the story was unfolding in New York City. A weakness is with the story and the late plot twist. Roger Ebert says, “Part of the fun in a movie like this is guessing the identity of the killer, and part of the problem with "Sea of Love" is that the audience is not fairly treated.” He feels the movie “cheats” by bringing in a character from “left field” at the last moment, to wrap the story up. In theory, doing so prevents the audience from guessing who did it. Although, there is so much time spent on getting to know all the characters, when you discover it was a character that had very little previous on screen time, the audience does feel a bit cheated.

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