

BODY HEAT (1981)

"You're not too smart. I like that in a man."

Major Credits:

director: Lawrence Kasdan
screenplay: Lawrence Kasdan
cinematographer: Richard H. Kline
editor: Carol Littleton
cast: William Hurt (Ned Racine); Kathleen Turner (Matty Walker);
Richard Crenna (Edmund Walker); Ted Danson (Peter Lowenstein); Mickey Rourke
(Teddy Lewis)

Background:

Body Heat is an explicit re-creation of the style of certain American melodramas of the 1940s called film noir. Movies such as The Big Sleep (1946), The Postman Always Rings Twice (1946), and Double Indemnity (1944) are typical of the genre, which is characterized by low-key, atmospheric lighting (providing the "black film" look), claustrophobic settings, and complicated plots steeped in adultery, murder, and other forms of human depravity, deception, and intrigue. The form was revitalized in the 1970s in such works as Roman Polanski's Chinatown, Robert Altman's The Long Goodbye, Bob Rafelson's re-make of The Postman Always Rings Twice, and this film, which marks Kasdan's directorial debut.

Lawrence Kasdan started out in advertising before turning to script writing, completing the screenplay for The Empire Strikes Back (whose original scenarist, Leigh Brackett, died suddenly) and following with Raiders of the Lost Ark and Continental Divide. The dialogue in Body Heat is marked by cryptic comments and sexual double entendres; the plot is replete with dark turns and complex motives.

Stylistic Qualities:

The film's first ten minutes are filled with images of oppressive heat, creating an atmosphere of unbearable tension and inevitable explosion. Kasdan replicates the atmosphere of film noir through the shadowy ambience of venetian blinds, palm leaves, cigarette smoke, and shimmering pavements. Many of the key sequences take place at night and employ dramatic lighting effects, most notably the final showdown. John Barry's bluesy music contributes to the total effect.

Questions for Discussion:

1. It is interesting to speculate about the possible social causes for the revival of interest in film noir. Historians point to the post-war anxiety about the spread of Communism and the dark enemy within the human psyche for the initial popularity of the genre in the late 1940s. What contemporary events might have affected the return of film noir in the 1970s?

2. Feminist critics have attacked Body Heat as a projection of male fantasy in which the female is an object of sexual desire without guilt because she is herself exploiting the man's lust and credulity. While Kathleen Turner's role is clearly derived from the predatory femmes fatales (Veronica Lake, Elizabeth Scott, Barbara Stanwyck) of earlier films, it must also be evaluated through the lens of recent women's studies.

3. In light of Body Heat's adherence to genre conventions and obvious erotic appeal, can the film be said to mean anything? Put another way, does a film like this have to mean anything in order to validate itself as cinematic art?