

## “X” (Film Review)

Written by Max Weinstein  
Tuesday, 07 June 2011 12:41

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What must it feel like to walk the streets for money at night? I’m not talking about scalping tickets, or collecting funds at a sleepout for the homeless. I’m talking, of course, about good old-fashioned prostitution. It’s a bleak, damaging occupation, yet exploitation films tend to have a field day with its bottomless vault of built-in sleaze (you’d need many more than 10 fingers to count how many end-credit rolls contain the words “Hooker #1, 2, 3, 4...”). But as call girl Holly (Viva Bianca) glances out at the night sky and buzzing streets below a client’s rooftop, her environs evoking at once a sense of the distant and the familiar, there comes the sudden realization that X (currently available on-demand from IFC Films) is going to reject any notions of a tongue-in-cheek, two-dimensional romp. She wants to escape.

We first meet Holly alongside a male colleague, Giles (Darren Moss), as she’s closing out what she hopes will be her last day on the job. Considering that this gig consists of performing a round of live pornography for bored, champagne-sipping, mid-life-crisis-ridden women looking on at a “social gathering” (has Oprah’s absence already killed the book club?), this hope is reasonable. Save for the film’s anticlimax, this opening sequence is the only one during which Australian director/co-writer Jon Hewitt grants his audience the chance to see daylight.



This use of day-and-night, black-and-white binaries works on several levels. When Holly looks into a mirror, for instance, her removal of her short, black wig to reveal free-flowing, golden hair shows the clash of her “job” with the faintest remnants of her misplaced identity. When night falls, her course becomes curiously disorienting. We observe Holly dining in a five-star restaurant across from an anonymous client (Peter Docker)—apparently ripped out of the pages of a Tommy Bahama ad—and the memory of what she does for a living seems to dissipate, however briefly. That the man’s name, Ligurian, is synonymous with a region of Italy known for its gorgeous beaches, small towns and superior cuisine grants a subtle reminder—subliminal or not—that their rendezvous is just as much an escapist fantasy of Holly’s as it is his. For a moment, the two seem strangely at ease with one another, and could fool most, who wouldn’t bother with a second look.

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X flips over this lulling sense of time and space to play out a full-blown one-night-gone-terribly-wrong thrill ride. It’s a decision that’s both expected given its genre stamp, yet ambitious given the issues it grapples with. Mere moments after making it known that beyond one last job, her sex-for-sale days are over, Holly crosses paths with Shay (Hanna Mangan Lawrence), whose streetwalking nights have literally just begun. I guess that’s what they call serendipity. Joined up for a two-gal job, Holly and Shay find themselves in a gangster’s penthouse, inadvertently landing amidst a violent crossfire. Hewitt’s eavesdropping approach here gives X a tangible here-and-now feeling, his camera maintaining a persistence of vision that makes this outing particularly suspenseful, engaging, even hypnotic, where it might otherwise be dragged out ad nauseam.

X is the fifth installment in Hewitt’s catalog of works within the very insular subset of Ozploitation. But just as Abel Ferrara and Lucio Fulci assimilated the Manhattan backdrops of some of their seminal works to satiate the breadth of grindhouse audiences (think MS. 45 or THE NEW YORK RIPPER), so too does the mutability of Hewitt’s shooting scheme transcend its specific location to give X an air of universality. That its creator broke in with a vampire actioner called BLOODLUST—starring “Big Bad Ralph” and “Max Crowdaddy” (?!) in leading roles—might explain X’s sometimes self-conscious aim to break the pulpy boundaries expected of its material. Indeed, much of Hewitt and Belinda McClory’s script is very straightforward, familiar stuff—world-weary, noir-type outcasts find each other, murder plot is introduced, revenge ensues.



Working again within that black-and-white scheme, however, the men Holly and Shay encounter over the course of the night occupy both sides of the spectrum to offset convention. When Holly refuses to run away with Ligurian, his angelic worship of her turns loathsome; Bennett (Stephen Phillips) sees Holly as nothing more than a dispensable punching bag as he chases her down; the romantic naiveté of cab driver Harry (Eamon Farren) sees beyond Shay’s jaded visage. What’s noteworthy is that X’s heroines are never condescended to. Even in AMERICAN PSYCHO—a disturbingly stomach-churning plunge into after-hours city life if there ever was one—the hookers Wall Street tycoon Patrick Bateman lures in for his own perverse

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amusement are seen through a singularly male gaze. While this serves its purpose in sending up Bateman’s ’80s decadence, PSYCHO’s shooting scheme also invites us, in its own way, to share some of these sadistic pleasures. When Holly takes her beatings, though we cringe—not just because she’s at the mercy of a madman, but because we understand that everything prior to them has been building to her grand exit, that there’s a life outside of this mess that she insists on living.

Bianca and Lawrence wear a numbing amount of pain and objectification on their faces and in their performances. The film surehandedly conveys this in its meticulous, spellbinding rhythm, even if it’s sometimes undermined for the sake of titillation. And like THE NEW YORK RIPPER, X contradictorily condemns misogyny while excessively exploiting it—but it also racks up its share of thick atmosphere and some potent moments in the process. By the time the sun rises, no great truths have come to light, but there’s hope lost and hope found, with one hell of a last line.

