desires to extend and what others desire to co-opt or eliminate – the audience must intuit the expository meaning in order to appreciate his plight. Otherwise, one is forced to ask: what empire? and so what?

And Then You Die is a classical narrative film. A clearer delineation, or a few examples thereof, of the day-to-day workings of Griffin’s business practices would have provided an essential level of causality and character motivation. Instead, in the second half, this layer of ‘realism’ the screenwriters are forced to resort to a number of overused contrivances in order to generate audience sympathy. Moreover, these are never successfully integrated into the narrative. For example, Griffin’s wife frequently complains that he does not spend enough time at home (an issue which the film fails to pursue), and the first attempt upon Griffin’s life also places his son in danger (a pointless gimmick, but worth three hankies at least).

The failure to generate audience interest is traceable, as well, to the filmmakers’ inability to properly define the characters in terms of a given locale, or to suggest how this environment contributes to the definition of a character. It might be, as one Montreal critic has remarked, that the film’s location photography provides a pleasant change from the CBC’s Toronto soundstages. But the location shooting never rises above providing the audience with a chance to engage in an I-know-that-place practice. As well, the location shooting contributes nothing to the feeling or atmosphere of the film. The location photography, and whatever ‘realism’ that may accompany it, is purely pragmatic: the film is shot in working-class Montreal districts because that is where the story takes place.

It might be contended that the combination of Richard Leiterman’s relatively high-key, dingy lighting and the working-class, nighttime locations makes obvious contributions to the feeling of the film as a gangster film. This is only partially true.

Firstly, there is little raison d’être, and certainly nothing stylistically convincing, in Leiterman’s interior, nighttime cinematography that could contribute to the feeling of any scene. Again, the issue appears to be simple pragmatism: the scenes are lit to conform to the locations and times of day. Secondly, this is exactly the kind of sloppy, alternately dingy and indiscriminately lit cinematography that one finds in most of the films that Leiterman has directed.

And Then You Die marks the English-language feature film debut for director Francis Mankiewicz, and one might have expected a more auspicious beginning. But it is difficult to lay blame in this case. Granted that Mankiewicz might not have felt at ease with the type of story he was telling, or the environment in which it is set. The problems with the film, however, are several, could not have made his task any easier. In addition, following a test screening in April 1987, the film underwent a major re-edit. Thus, it is impossible to speculate about Mankiewicz’s original intentions. To the director’s credit, the acting, at least, is often inspired. In particular, Dobson’s performance as a consummate capitalist/gangster’s puppeteer is convincing. From the impeding chaos that has suddenly surrounded him, are memorable.

The overriding impression of And Then You Die is one of wasted effort. Consider the following. The initial problematic in the film, the animosity that McGrath feels towards Griffin and, as a result of this, McGrath’s efforts to apprehend Griffin, creates a series of enigmas which the audience assumes that the film will eventually answer. For example, will Griffin be arrested? What mistakes will be made, that will allow him to be arrested? Why is McGrath so obsessed with Griffin? It is questions such as these that the first half of the film sets-up and then dangles as a series of red herrings. And it is around these questions that the most intriguing relationship in the film, McGrath and Griffin, is predicated, and upon which McGrath’s whole psychology is based.

These enigmas however, are not incorporated into the latter half of the film, the half in which Griffin’s ‘empire’ unravels, the half in which these questions would appear to be closest to being answered. In the end, instead of an interesting psychological interplay between two antagonistic characters, one is left with a relationship whose exploration has been evaded, whose set-up has been wasted, and whose problematic, in retrospect, appears to have been nothing but forced. Had this occurred in Edwin Alonzo Boyd, such a set of circumstances might have accented well with the open-ended nature of the film, but in a classical film such as And Then You Die the payoff for the audience’s interest in the character is different than expected. And the result is nothing but disappointment.

Jeffrey Weigensberg


The 1987 Gemini Awards

We all desire congratulation. To be called up in front of an assembly of your peers and told that you have done a good job is surely the emotional pinnacle of success. Money is mere consolation by comparison.

Knowing this. one must respect the growing popularity of those industry-wide festivals of self-congratulation known as awards ceremonies. When the industry in question is entertainment, however, the awards are broadcast, something peculiar happens. The awards ceremony becomes multi-purpose. It must, of course, congratulate the entertainers. It must also be entertainment. Combining these two functions, which the audience assumes that the film will eventually answer. For example, will Griffin be arrested? What mistakes will be made, that will allow him to be arrested? Why is McGrath so obsessed with Griffin? It is questions such as these that the first half of the film sets-up and then dangles as a series of red herrings. And it is around these questions that the most intriguing relationship in the film, McGrath and Griffin, is predicated, and upon which McGrath’s whole psychology is based.

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