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Review of Pretty Poison

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Pretty Poison
(Fox Home Entertainment, 9.5, 2006)

Pauline Kael opens her famous 1968 review of *Pretty Poison* saying that when she discovered it “had opened without advance publicity or screenings, I rushed to see it because a movie that makes the movie companies so nervous they’re afraid to show it to the critics stands an awfully good chance of being an interesting movie.” How times have changed. Such an action by a distributor today is a sign that either the film in question is a stinker or is criticproof.

Pretty Poison, however, is clearly a case of Fox not understanding what it had and underestimating the potential audience for a black comedy in which murder is meant to be both horrifying and funny. Had those suits never heard of *Psycho*? Partly through the impetus of Kael’s review, the film reached a wider, though still limited, audience and has become a cult favorite.

Dennis Pitt (Anthony Perkins) makes his way to Winslow, Massachusetts, after his release from a mental institution. Dennis, incarcerated because of a fatal fire when he was fifteen, combats the boredom of his job at a chemical plant with a rich fantasy life in which he is a CIA agent. He convinces the sexiest girl in town, high-schooler Sue Ann Stepanek (Tuesday Weld), that he is spy and enlists her aid. Someone as game for adventure as Sue Ann may be more than Dennis can handle, as he soon discovers.

Adapted from Stephen Geller’s novel *She Let Him Continue* by Lorenzo Semple, Jr., who was honored by the New York Film Critics for his effort, *Pretty Poison* is a satire of small-town mores. Sue Ann’s slutty mom (the wonderful Beverly Garland) thinks she can do anything she wants while exerting complete control over her daughter. In one of many nifty scenes, Mrs. Stepanek, meeting Dennis, sizes him up both in terms of his reliability with Sue Ann and as a potential tumble for herself.

Pretty Poison also looks at the thin line between sex and violence and Americans’ ongoing desire to solve problems with guns. Coming in the same year as the King and Bobby Kennedy assassinations, the Chicago police riot during the Democratic convention, and the war in Vietnam, Fox’s unease with the movie can be understood.

Pretty Poison is the first feature by director Noel Black, whose short *Skaterdater* had won an award at Cannes and been nominated for an Oscar. Black shows plenty of promise here, but after his next two films, *Cover Me Babe* and *Jennifer on My Mind*, received bad reviews and reached few viewers, he retreated into television.

While much of the direction of *Pretty Poison* seems conventional, with too many close-ups—and a dreadful television-like score by Johnny Mandel—

there are several effective scenes or images. Before they meet, Dennis admires Sue Ann from afar, watching with an ironic grin as her drill-team practices. Uncertain about the consequences he has set into motion, Dennis sits glumly in a morning mist. The most indelible scene comes when sex and violence are merged into one startling image, both repulsive and hilarious. Regardless of anything else going on in the film, *Pretty Poison* must be seen for this one shot.

Dennis is, of course, a variation on Perkins' infamous Norman Bates, but the actor gives a less neurotic performance. Dennis may be a nutter, but he's a lot more normal than most of those around him, a source of much of the film's irony. Perkins excels with Dennis' delight at Sue Ann's sexuality and with his horror at her non-sexual actions.

As good as Perkins is, *Pretty Poison* belongs to our Tuesday. In 1970, Eugene Archer wrote a [gushing essay](#) in *The New York Times* about how Weld was the cult actress of the age, doing excellent work in films appreciated by critics but generally ignored by audiences. You can have your Dunaways and your Fondas, but for me, there was no better American actress than Weld between *The Cincinnati Kid* in 1965 and *Plays It as It Lays* in 1972. No one else captured so well, and with such subtlety, the distinctive American blend of simultaneous innocence and carnality. As Weld herself reportedly said about turning down Kubrick's *Lolita*, "I am Lolita."

One defining Weld moment comes in the hit-and-miss satire *Lord Love a Duck* when her character goes into an orgy of delight while shopping, with her father, for cashmere sweaters. The other is the startling scene mentioned above which would suggest total trust in her director. Ironically, Weld and Black supposedly clashed, and she hated her performance. Perhaps with some distance, she can appreciate it better.

Despite the fascinating backstory, worthy of Criterion reflections, Fox provides no extras beyond trailers for what it perceives as similar movies. You will be no doubt pleased to learn that *Black Widow* opens in theaters February 6. The studio seems determined to repeat its neglect of 1968. Otherwise, the anamorphic 1.85:1 transfer is acceptable, a bit grainy in a few places but capturing David Quaid's soft-focus cinematography in other scenes.—Michael Adams

