



In the Cut (18)
24th January 2005

Director: **Jane Campion**
UK 2003

Running time : 119 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Meg Ryan** (Frannie Avery), **Mark Ruffalo** (Detective James Malloy), **Jennifer Jason Leigh** (Pauline), **Nick Damici** (Detective Richard Rodriguez), **Sharrieff Pugh** (Cornelius Webb).

SCRIPT: **Jane Campion, Susanna Moore**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Dion Beebe**. EDITING: **Alexandre De Franceschi**. MUSIC: **Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson**.

An English teacher divides her time between her job, her half-sister and her passion for words. When her New York suburb is affected by a brutal killing she makes the acquaintance of a police detective she suspects may be implicated, but she becomes sexually involved with him anyway.

Shot claustrophobically in saturated colour, shallow and narrow focus (in the former only one plane is sharply defined, in the latter only part of the frame is clearly visible), this remarkable film completely involves you in its closely circumscribed world (mostly strip joints, bars and dingy apartments) so that you accept the protagonist's irrational behaviour. The stylistic devices mentioned above could be seen to chime with the professional concerns of the main character: Frannie is an English professor teaching Virginia Woolf, voraciously observant of language wherever she finds it. An individual word, for example 'disarticulate', produces inordinate fascination in her, aptly enough in this case, since it ties the film's gruesome scenario into the exhaustive methods of modern literary study, themselves the object of some scorn by her students.

The real subject of the film is the predicament of the modern urban woman, sexual but lonely, wary of falling prey to men but hungry for contact. Both Frannie and half-sister Pauline are thirty-something single girls living alone, their past littered with failed relationships and a fickle father, who crops up in Frannie's dreams via a *Little Women*-style sepia flashback.

Into this hothouse atmosphere - exacerbated by a sweltering New York summer - comes a spate of brutal killings of young women (the familiar part of the film's scenario). Frannie thinks she may have seen the killer engaged in a basement coupling she observed (notice the tattoo on his wrist, difficult to make out in a seamy close-up). What comes across as provocative on the film's part is that she then positively courts danger with the would-be killer,

who turns out to be a cop asking questions in the neighbourhood of the murders. The more dangerous she thinks he might be, the more she is attracted to him and the more she revels in their sex together.

You may remember a similar scenario in *Sea of Love*, with Al Pacino as the cop in peril, but there it wasn't just a question of the shoe being on the other foot. For when Pacino realized the danger to which he had exposed himself, he completely, well, flipped. Women, it would seem, delight in risk-taking, men live in sweaty fear of the emasculating dagger (*Basic Instinct* and all that).

All changes when the killer strikes closer to home, however, and Frannie remembers some of her civic duty just in time. But is her cop the one?

Well, you've probably guessed what happens by now, and certainly the resolution is less interesting than how Campion gets there. The script is based on Susanna Moore's novel, which had a more cautionary conclusion, but Campion rightly felt this would be both too dark and too pat for a film adaptation. As it is we are reminded of one of those seventies Hitchcock homages (*Last Embrace, Still of the Night*), which is a shame, too.

In the Cut will no doubt be most remembered as the film in which Meg Ryan finally disposed of her cutesy, apple pie image in favour of something more akin to the real Meg. Certainly she flings herself into her erotic scenes with unself-conscious abandon, while putting the cause of feminism back some years at the same instant.

David Clare