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ANGEL DUST

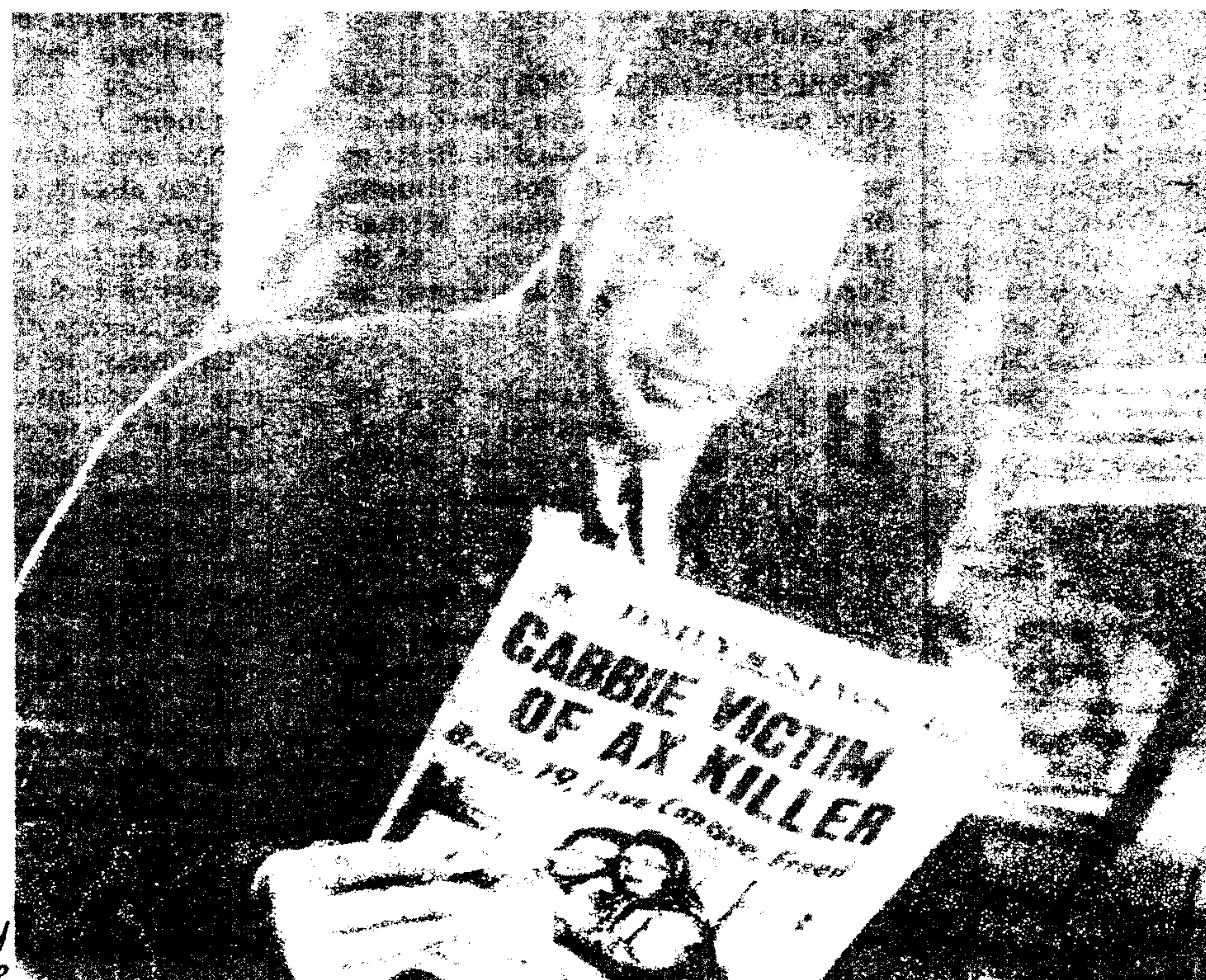
by Owen Gleiberman

Angel Heart is hardly the first movie to get slapped with an X rating and then trimmed, by its studio, to an R (9½ Weeks, Crimes of Passion, and Scarface are recent, notable examples), but it's the first one in memory to cause a major uproar in the movie industry — specifically, over a ratings system that has grown transparently obsolete.

Because the new, altered prints of the film weren't ready in time, some critics, including those of us in Boston, got to see the uncut version, and the scene that caused the brouhaha wasn't difficult to spot (it's the one in which Mickey Rourke and Lisa Bonet fuck their brains out as they get drenched in blood). The cut version doesn't really leave much out; the blood-



Lisa Bonet



Mickey Rourke

spattered screwing just ends a little sooner (10 seconds sooner, to be exact). But the public commotion has been enough to raise the issue of whether the X rating, with the porno-movie stigma it still carries from the late '60s, hasn't outlived any useful function. The studios have long dreaded the X rating, because it's the commercial kiss of death. Many newspapers refuse to run ads for X pictures, and though the rating may attract rubber-neckers, it scares off most of Middle America. As far as I know, the last three movies of any significance to be released with an X were *Last Tango in Paris*, *Midnight Cowboy*, and *A Clockwork Orange*, all of which were subsequently changed to R. Every

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Angel Heart

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other film deemed risqué has been either trimmed or, in the case of horror movies like *The Evil Dead*, released with no rating whatsoever.

Suggestions have been made that a new, milder rating be introduced. Industry analyst Anne Thompson came up with the rating R-18, which would specify that the film in question is more daring than a typical R but that it hardly violates unspeakable taboos. *Angel Heart* may well help create this rating, much as *Indiana Jones* and *Gremlins* paved the way for PG-13. The paradox here is that the ruckus over this film has little to do with moviemaking (or even censorship) and everything to do with selling. Yes, the X rating is a puritan holdover and, yes, the "offensive" scene should never have been trimmed. It's worth noting, however, that even as the film's studio (Tri-Star) is making a righteous fuss over the rating, complete with the usual freedom-of-speech pronouncements, it has used *Angel Heart's* original X rating as a key element in the ad campaign. Reports of X ratings have been used to drum up pre-release publicity before, but from the moment the MPAA Rating Board spoke, Tri-Star began to exploit the scandal. The studio invited industry reporters to see (and, by implication, write about) the uncut version, effectively making them the final link in the chain of publicity. And for nearly two weeks now, a television campaign has been selling *Angel Heart* — which, incidentally, is a mildly diverting slick-junk thriller — as The Movie They Didn't Want You To See or the one about which Everything You've Heard Is True.

What's remarkable about this last-ditch marketing effort, with its sneaky suggestion that the *cut* version of the film is still, in some ineffable way, the film you weren't allowed to see, is that it lays bare the way the puritan reductivism of the rating board has undermined the aesthetics of the movies themselves. What gets the rating board's dander up is no one factor but an often arbitrary combination of factors. Even in its original form, for example, Brian De Palma's *Scarface* was no more violent than dozens of slasher movies that get R ratings. In the case of *Angel Heart*, one of the factors was surely that the girl baring her breasts isn't just another starlet bimbo but the sweet young thing of *The Cosby Show*. It's no accident, of course, that she was cast in the first place. By using Lisa Bonet as they did, the producers and the director, Alan Parker (a gifted craftsman with a sleazy, exploitative streak), knew that, in effect, they were offering moviegoers the public defiling of an erstwhile "pure" celebrity. The prospect of Bonet's baring all had a *National Enquirer* tinge even before the rating board got hold of the movie. Whether or not Parker and the producers foresaw the possibility of an X, they clearly contrived the picture, or at least the sex scene, as a piece of titillation. They were exploiting the same "forbidden" ethic that fuels a reactionary organization like the MPAA.

It's time the X rating was replaced by a more descriptive, accurate category such as R-18, which wouldn't carry an association with straight-ahead porn

films (they, in any case, have their own, special category: Triple X). And one reason, as *Angel Heart* makes clear, is that the archaic, antiseptic temperament that stamps films with a scarlet letter on the basis of how many seconds the camera lingers over some young celebrity's breasts also dictates the way our movies are conceived and marketed. *Last Tango* and *Midnight Cowboy* broke the rules through their moral independence: their directors were trying to tell honest stories and, *in the process*, to go deeper into certain areas than movies had previously. By contrast, *Angel Heart* might have been made with one eye on the rating board. It was conceived — calculated — to go right Up To The Line, and when it happened to step over the line, well, that was nothing a 10-second trim couldn't fix, and nothing the studio couldn't exploit to hell anyway.

Ironically, the film in question isn't a sexy revel (like *9½ Weeks*), or even a romance. *Angel Heart* is yet another attempt to drag the vintage-Hollywood private eye into a world of gleamingly decadent violence and contemporary madness. You can tell how the movie is going to stack up in the thrills department when you hear the hero's heartbeat on the soundtrack. Parker has used this device once before — in the opening scene of *Midnight Express* — and it worked dazzlingly well: though you knew you were being manipulated, the sound of Billy Hayes's thumping chest as he approached the Turkish airport guards was like an emotional barometer. Parker wasn't hyping the premise, exactly — he was taking a premise that was jacked up to begin with and putting you inside the character's sweaty soul. Here, he's hyping: when Rourke, a New York dick hired for a case he doesn't understand or even want, stands in the street, his tell-tale heart pounding away, it's about as exciting as listening to your watch tick. As an entertainer, Parker is exactly as good as his material: he gives the same glossy, rhythmically proficient treatment to a single-minded melodrama like *Midnight Express*, a cotton-brained youth fantasy like *Fame*, or a raw, contemplative divorce saga like *Shoot the Moon*. In *Angel Heart*, working from the novel *Falling Angel*, by William Hjörtsberg (Parker did the script himself), he's come up with a competent yet threadbare mystery full of omens, voodoo rituals featuring jungle dances and chicken blood (I've yet to see a good film that featured voodoo rituals), and characters who keep being bumped off before we get to know them — the whole thing topped off with a whopper of a metaphysical finale that will have you clutching your chair in ticklish disbelief.

Set in 1955, the movie is about Harry Angel (Rourke), a loner detective who's approached, for shadowy reasons, to hunt down the legendary Johnny Favorite, a former Big Band crooner and enlisted man who hasn't been heard from since he was injured in World War II and shipped home to a mental hospital. Who wants Johnny found? An odd, Gypsy-ish aristocrat named Louis Cyphre — played by Robert De Niro in a bushy black beard, long hair, and mandarin fingernails that he waves around like a society matron flaunting her diamond bracelet. De Niro's recent career might be subtitled "A Shortcut to Self-Parody." He's already doing what Brando did in the '70s, giving eccentric special-guest performances, coasting less on his talent than on his status as a Former Great Actor. He has a smoothly menacing manner here, and his hair and fingernails give him a mad, unknowable air, but he doesn't risk taking the role to the edge of camp extravagance the way that, say, Christopher Walken might have. Sloppily, De Niro lets his lower-New York speech patterns undercut his cultivated airs — it's a passive, phoned-in performance.

Harry heads down to New Orleans, where he tries to talk to anyone who knew Johnny. There's the fortune teller (Charlotte Rampling) who was obsessed with him, the black musician (Brownie McGhee) who once played with him, and the beautiful 17-year-old (Bonet) whose mother once had an affair with him. The way the film is structured, Rourke's little encounters don't expand and pay off later in the story. Most all the people he interviews get killed in some horrible way right after he talks to them. This ups the lurid factor (and there is, of course, our mechanical curiosity about who's doing the killings), but it means you basically don't give a damn about anyone in the picture except Rourke, who seems to be chasing a ghost. Johnny Favorite isn't just the missing person, he's the MacGuffin, and Parker makes the mistake of never letting you forget it. The film's mood is languorous, heat-drenched. Parker tries to let the dreamy, deliberate pace heighten the intrigue, as Polanski did in *Chinatown*, but here we just have more time to notice how few strands there are to the mystery, and how flimsily the motifs — chicken legs, a star symbol, Valentine's Day, Harry's recurring flashback to a wartime welcome-home celebration in 1943 — tie together.

For Parker, a graduate of the smother-it-in-gauze school of high-tech cinematography, "atmosphere" is something you ladle over a scene, like glazed sugar on a doughnut. His basic technique here, derived from Nicolas Roeg (derived from Hitchcock), is to let the camera focus on neutral bystanders, such as a little girl seated on the stairs, a group of black children playing jazz on a New Orleans street, or a fat lady wading in the ocean. The imagery, a mixture of the slick and the raw, creates a mood of prettified documentary realism. This style tells you that everything you're seeing is "objective," and therefore that if something seems ominous or threatening, like a boy doing a tap dance in the street, that must be because there's something threatening in the image itself — those bystanders must *know something*. Parker is trying to do what Roeg did in *Don't Look Now*, to impart a sense of organic dread to decaying surfaces in the environment, and to *make* those surfaces a correlative of his hero's inner state. Parker loves to focus on a face that's not Hollywood be-

and get you to study the flaws in it; his compositions candify ugliness, as when he shows rats scurrying through garbage. But Parker doesn't take the time to connect images the way Roeg does, so all this amounts to is a kind of skin-deep aestheticism: it has no after-effect — it's just highbrow video moviemaking. (Let us not forget that this is the man who gave us that feature-length slog of highbrow video, *Pink Floyd the Wall*.)

What keeps *Angel Heart* alive is Mickey Rourke. I'd all but given up hope for him after his last few performances, but he seems to have struck a balance between the ironic gentleness of his early roles and the tougher, more abrasive postures he explored (to excess) in *Year of the Dragon*. Bold and charming and a bit of a brooder, his Harry Angel has a fundamental decency — he's a guy who knows how to give people a hard time, but not until he's pushed to it. Watching Rourke flirt with the luscious, ethereal Bonet, or with Kathleen Wilhoite as a nurse he's trying to pump for information, I was reminded of something he hasn't shown since *Diner* — that he can be one of the most softly romantic male leads in contemporary movies. Rourke projects a deep, intimate appreciation of women. When he's chatting one up, his confident, beckoning imp's grin tells you he's happy just for being in her company. As the movie goes on, Harry realizes that he has less and less of a grip on his investigation, and Rourke lets in trickles of fear, even hysteria, with masterful control.

The script is a succession of sub-Chandler/Hammett epigrams, and Rourke keeps lighting his match with a flick of his thumb. This anachronistic private-eye stuff is window dressing, though. Parker is a dyed-in-the-wool sensationalist. He's created a spooky dream sequence (beautifully played by Rourke), with Harry in a blood-soaked shirt, but most of the violence here is on the level of the tongue-biting scene in *Midnight Express*. One victim literally gets her heart torn out (the organ is served up for us in all its glistening, butcher-block splendor), and in the big, erotic number, which is a semihallucination, the blood pours from the walls and ceiling and onto the thrusting bodies. The scene has a little to do with the story; mostly, it's a chance for Parker to indulge his taste for expressionistic S&M spectacle. He makes flesh and blood seem equally impure. □