KINONIK

ATLANTIC CITY (1980)

Directed by Louis Malle

WEDNESDAY September 23rd 7PM

SATURDAY September 26th 2PM / 7PM

16mm LPP



In the fall of 1979, Louis Malle learned that a building near his set was scheduled for demolition. He moved a scene so the wreckage would land in the background... more than once. The city was tearing itself down faster than his shooting schedule, and he simply pointed the camera in the direction of collapse and called it production value. Every exterior in Atlantic City is a document of a place in its last weeks.

"So we never live, but we hope to live," wrote Blaise Pascal. "And, as we are always preparing to be happy, it is inevitable we should never be so." There are accidents in dice, but not in the naming of characters.

Burt Lancaster was not the first choice for Lou Pascal. Henry Fonda was too frail to insure. Robert Mitchum, fresh out of cosmetic surgery, said he only played men under forty-five. Lancaster was sixty-six and not so choosy. He read John Guare's screenplay and said yes before Malle finished the pitch.

The film opens on Susan Sarandon at a sink, washing away the marine funk of her oyster bar shift with half of a lemon while Maria Callas sings on the radio. The camera pulls back to an old man watching her through the window from a dark room. It’s the architecture of their characters in a nutshell: Sally, preparing for an imagined future — a croupier's table in Monte Carlo — and Lou, who ran numbers for small-timers and has spent the decades since promoting himself, in the retelling, to a gangster he never was. Outside, wrecking crews clear ground that would become infamous in a few short years.

Out of the dust emerges Sally’s drifter ex-husband. Unwelcome, carrying something stolen and towing a great deal of trouble close behind — but perhaps a blessing in disguise. For a few days her future seems close enough to touch. Close enough, too, that Lou steps out of the past he'd invented and into a version of it that is suddenly, dangerously real. For a little while the whole dying town seems to shimmer with a borrowed life.

The casinos promised renewal and delivered a machine that moves money in one direction. The old resort had been a racket too — but a racket with a boardwalk on it, a place people actually walked. What replaced it wants its name on the building and nothing of the town beneath. Malle caught the swap at the exact instant it happened... and not unlike Malle, we’re also keeping an ear pricked for rumblings of demolition because we know the next sound that follows will be the hollow rattling of cans of gold spray paint.