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Author(s)	Andrew Sarris Andrew Sarris
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films

by Andrew Sarris

The first part of Mr. Sarris's review of "Belle de Jour" appeared in the May 2 issue of The Voice. —Ed.

The ending of "BELLE DE JOUR" is tantalizingly open as narrative. Husson has told Pierre about Belle de Jour or at least we presume so. Bunuel does not show the scene, and we are not obliged to believe anything we do not see, but there is no particular reason to believe that Husson has not carried out his stated intention. Bunuel does not cast his audience adrift in a sea of ambiguity at every opportunity; he is simply not that interested in dramatic suspense. Severine enters Pierre's room, and for the first time in the film Bunuel's technique obscures the flow of action. Bunuel breaks up the spatial unity of the scene with alternative sights and sounds to indicate a range of possibilities. Cut to Jean Sorel's tear-stained face. Pierre Knows All And Feels Betrayed. Cut to his crumpled, upturned hand. Pierre Is Dead From The Shock Of His Grief. Cut on the sound-track to the bells of a carriage, and to Sorel's voice asking of Deneuve's pensive face what Severine is thinking. Everything Turns Back To Fantasy.

Or does it? Some critics have suggested that Severine has been cured of her masochistic obsession by becoming Belle de Jour. Hence, the empty carriage at the end of the film. She will no longer take THAT trip. One French critic has argued that the entire film is a dream, but the big problem with such an argument is Bunuel's visually explicit brand of surrealism. Earlier in the film, Husson calls on Severine at her home and is rudely rebuffed. Bunuel cuts immediately to a shockingly "cute" Boy - Girl profile two - shot of Severine and Husson at the ski lodge. As the camera pulls back, we see Jean Sorel and Macha Meril at the same table. It must be a dream, we assure ourselves, while Severine and Husson slip out of sight under the table to perform some unspeakable act of sacrilege against bourgeois society. The table begins to bump up and down, but the deserted partners, Sorel and Meril, are only mildly concerned. Bunuel has transported "Belle de Jour" Back to "L'Age D'Or," but the effect of the scene is unsettling if we accept it as occurring in Severine's mind. Here I think Bunuel slipped into a sadistic attitude of his own toward Pierre since this is the only scene in the film in which Pierre is made to look completely ridiculous. The key to the scene, however, is not Severine's characterization, but Bunuel's satiric attitude toward Hollywood sentimentality. The profile shot more than the table-bumping gives the show away, but audiences would never "get" the joke without the table-bumping, and Bunuel does not disdain vulgarity as one of the strategies of surrealism.

Actually we are such Puritans that we talk of surrealism almost exclusively in the solemn terms of social defiance. Humor is only a means to an end, but not an end in itself. No never? Well hardly ever. And in Bunuel's case, laughter serves to disinfect libertinism of its satanic aura. If we can laugh at the prissiness of perversion and the fastidiousness of fetishism not with smug superiority, but with carnal complicity, we become too implicated to remain indifferent. Bunuel's masochist, unlike Genet's in "The Balcony," satisfies his devious lechery by stroking the thighs of his professionally cruel mistress. Bunuel's brothel is a brothel and not one of Genet's microcosms, and Bunuel's sensuality turns in upon itself as an enclosed experience devoid of allegorical signification.

Similarly, the entire film turns in upon itself by ending with the same question with which it began: "Severine, what are you thinking of?" And Severine tells the truth in her fashion. She thinks of places and conveyances and trips and herds of Spanish bulls named Remorse except one named Expiation. At the end, she is still dreaming, and who is to say that the dream is any less real or vivid than the reality it accompanies? Certainly not Bunuel's probing but compassionate camera. There are several possible interpretations of Bunuel's ending, but the formal symmetry of the film makes the debate academic. Bunuel is ultimately ambiguous so as not to moralize about his subject. He wishes neither to punish Severine nor to reward her. He prefers to contemplate the grace with which she accepts her fate, and Bunuel is nothing if not fatalistic. Even the hapless husband is granted a mystical premonition when he sees an empty wheelchair in the street. It is destined for him, and the concreteness of Bunuel's visual imagery is so intense that we feel that the wheelchair is as destined for Pierre as Pierre is destined for the wheelchair.

Bunuel's fatalism actually undercuts the suspense of the narrative to the extent that there is no intellectual pressure for a resolved ending. Between the fatalism and the formal symmetry, "Belle de Jour" seems completely articulated as a Bunuelian statement. We do not have to know what we are not meant to know, and Bunuel establishes a precedent within his film for the ambiguity of his ending. This precedent involves Madame Anais, after Severine the most absorbing character in the film. Alone of all the characters, Madame Anais is the truth-seeker, and she is inevitably far from the mark. She misunderstands the motivations of Belle de Jour from the outset, and she misinterprets Belle de Jour's departure. Still, she is always staring at Belle de Jour as if it were possible to peel away layers of lacquered flesh to the raw impulses underneath, The scenes in which Genevieve Page's Madame Anais gazes with loving curiosity at Catherine Deneuve's Belle de Jour gleam with a psychological insight not customary with Bunuel, or as rigorously empirical aestheticians would have it, the scenes gleam with the appearance of a psychological insight, the very beautiful appearance derived from two extraordinary screen incarnations.

The great irony of "Belle de Jour" is that a 67-year-old Spanish surrealist has set out to liberate humanity of its bourgeois sentimentality only to collide with the most sentimental generation of flowery feelings in human history.