PAUL SCHARDER on "BELLE DE JOUR"

"Belle de Jour" ranks with "L'Age D'Or" and "Los Olvidados" as a landmark not only of Luis Bunuel's career, but of the history of motion pictures. These films have beauty and power in their own right and have also influenced (or will influence) the nature of film-making. When I first saw "Belle de Jour" six months ago I was somewhat mystified, not knowing why or if I liked the film. But in the following months I found myself increasingly referring to "Belle de Jour" as an example of what is new and important in movies, and of what the future might entail. I am now convinced that "Belle de Jour" will be 1968's most influential film, "Weekend" notwithstanding.

"Belle de Jour" is a film which opens doors. Bunuel has always been better at suggesting possibilities than limiting them. He tried to close one sort of door in "Viridiana," but couldn't resist leaving others ajar—which proved to be the film's redeeming virtue. Like Bunuel's best films "Belle de Jour" does not end when the theater empties; like "L'Age D'Or" and "Los Olvidados" it will spawn films in its wake.

Bunuel's 1930 "L'Age D'Or" was the first feature length surrealist film. It was a blatant effort to shock the bourgeois out of their naive morality. It made no attempt to persuade, only to cram irrationality down unwilling throats. The public was shocked, not persuaded; and although Bunuel couldn't obtain any financing himself, surrealistic images kept cropping up in the strangest places, like the Sternberg-Dietrich films. In 1952 Bunuel resuscitated surrealism with the powerful "Los Olvidados," a surreal documentary of Mexican slums that made the Italian "neo-realists" look conventional. Those slice of life dramas were never quite the same, and although "Los Olvidados" never achieved popular success, you kept seeing it later films.

With "Belle de Jour" surrealism becomes a new thing again. In 1968 he does not need to shock the audience into irrationality: they are already there, where he was in 1928. Recent history, the H-Bomb, the Vietnam War, assassination, the futility of protest, have made us all the surrealists that Breton and friends were in the twenties. We no longer believe in the irreversibility of history, in the primacy of certain virtues; we speak of life in terms of "games," and of politics in terms of fantasy fulfillment. There is little left to shock us: dislocation is a way of life. Bunuel no longer needs to shock (by doing so he would become bourgeois himself) but needs to demonstrate the validity and complexity of the original surrealistic argument.

"L'Age D'Or" promulgated the basic irrationality of surrealism; "Los Olvidados" posited the surrealistic nature of reality; and "Belle de Jour" demonstrates the reality of surrealism. Bunuel officiates in that illusion-reality shell game that novelists have been at for some time. But film with its intrinsic reality allows Bunuel some sleight of hand tricks that the novelists have only dreamed of.

The "alternative realities" of "Belle de Jour" are precisely discussed in Raymond Durgnat's "Luis Bunuel." Bunuel establishes certain fantasy signposts then undermines the validity of the clues he has given us. The opening carriage sequence represents the obvious sort of fantasy sequence one would expect in an earlier Bunuel film. But the clues (the horse-drawn carriage and bells) reappear in a sequence which appears to be one of Severine's "real" fantasy fulfillments—the escapade with the necrophiliac. The same carriage —now empty—makes its final appearance after Pierre's dubious cure. Bunuel deviously complicates Severine's basic illusion-reality interchange with different levels of nonreality: there are flashbacks, subconscious dreams, imaginary but related events, and out and out there are flashbacks (Severine's childhood), subconscious dreams (the cattle named expiation and remorse), related by imaginary events (the Count and his carriage), and out and out fantasies (the opening sequence). Bunuel makes the viewer think that he can separate these adventures: this is fantasy, this is flashback, this is dream; but then the spectator realizes that Bunuel is changing the rules as the film progresses. Eventually even the "real" scenes become suspect, because the entire film is concerned with fantasy fulfillment. Severine goes to the brothel, like her customers, to fulfill her imaginary role. Husson makes a game of deception, and Marcel finds out he is not what he has seemed. Pierre imagines that Severine is one thing, but when he finds she is something else, he himself becomes something else.

To compound his deception of simplicity Bunuel films "Belle de Jour" in a new style—a pure sort of Lubitsch. The camera doesn't need to overtly reinforce his new type of illusion, by play against it—the effect is all the greater.

In the end, after Pierre's baffling cure, there is only one thing the viewer can be certain of: he is watching a film—and this is the most important thing. Bunuel wants us to be perfectly aware that we are watching a movie about a young girl who is making her own movie with characters who are also creating movies. Bunuel does not want to guide the viewer through the labyrinth, simply get him inside and let him find his own way. Bunuel is a devious guide who doesn't care whether we get lost or not. The viewer must, like Bunuel and Severine, see all the possibilities of reality and create his own movie by delimiting what he sees on the screen. The joint product will be a Bunuel-viewer creation which tells us as much about ourselves as it does about the director.

Bunuel's approach to illusion is substantially different from that of, say, Fellini. The Fellini of "8 1/2" is a trustworthy guide: if we stick to him we may not know what the difference between reality and illusion is, but we'll know what Fellini is about. Fellini, not the viewer, is the subject of "8 1/2." Bunuel, like Fellini, creates the world, but, unlike Fellini, he doesn't tell us where to live. The only other film-maker with an approach to reality similar to Bunuel's is the Robbe-

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Grillet of "Marienbad" and "Trans-Europe Express." But these films are too emotionally shallow to make the demands on the viewer that "Belle de Jour" does.

In "Belle de Jour" Bunuel presents a new approach to one of the basic tenets of surrealism: ritual. In the world of incongruity, the surrealist purges his evil by the artificial mode of ritual. This is why Bunuel has always been at odds with the Roman Catholic Church. Both realized the need for surrealistic expression of evil, but the Church thought that the end result would be beneficial. But in "Belle de Jour" the ritual is no longer, like the earlier Bunuel films, a physical ritual (repeated fetishes), but mental. Surrealism is, like religion, a ritual of the mind, not of the body. The ritual of Severine is like that of Bunuel is like that of the viewer: we see the possibilities and create the order. History, like films, has been the ritual of evil people (that is, all of us), and the artist's obligation is not to scream and shock to propose a more acceptable creation.

"Belle de Jour" poses all sorts of possibilities. I think we will enjoy this insidious form of surrealism in films for years to come. Bunuel has shocked us when we needed it in "L'Age D'Or;" he undermined realism when we trusted it in "Los Olvidados;" and now when we are left only with his illusion, he makes it beautiful and viable in "Belle de Jour." "Belle de Jour" poses the possibility of redoing "Viridiana" not for shock effect, but for mythic effect: The Roman Catholic Church as an acceptable or nonacceptable creation. His next and final film, a history of the RC Church, may be just that.