

Belle de Jour

Luis Buñel FR/IT 1967 100m



Luis Buñuel's exquisite and spell-binding film – allegedly his last – opens to the sound of coach bells as Severine (Catherine Deneuve) and her husband Pierre (Jean Sorel) are driven in an open landau through an autumnal landscape; Pierre abruptly stops the coach, and on his orders a liveried coachman and footman drag Severine from the coach, bind her, beat her and molest her. The next shot shows Severine and Pierre, serene and chaste, together in their Paris flat.

At the close of the film, as Pierre sits lifelessly in his wheelchair, Severine again hears the bells; she calls Pierre over to the window, and he walks towards her in perfect health; only this time the carriage we see driving down the same country road is empty. The suggestion here seems to be that an exorcism has taken place, and that Severine has transcended her masochistic needs. But we remain uncertain whether it is reality or fantasy that has dispelled her masochism, uncertain whether Pierre is really paralysed and his resurrection a fantasy; or whether he is really unharmed, with everything that has come before – including all that has taken place at Madame Anaïs' 'house' – merely representing the progressive fantasies by which Severine is liberated.

The beauty of *Belle de Jour*, though, lies in the fact that Buñuel has made interpretation irrelevant, blending memory, fantasy and reality into an indissoluble whole. While Severine's life and fantasies betray a total separation of flesh and spirit, love and eroticism, Sacha Vierny's camerawork fuses the two realms into one by extracting (as Baudelaire chose to do) the quintessentially beautiful from good and evil alike. By showing us only the surface of his characters, by refusing to judge them, Buñuel goes beyond moral distinctions, moving rhythmically and inexorably – without the emotive help of music – to a final image diffused with a sense of liberation.

Jan Dawson –*Sight and Sound*

Re-released almost forty years after its original cinema exhibition, Belle de Jour still has the power to shock. Not through explicit nudity (it is a highly erotic work without being titillating) but by the shocking images, and the superb performances that contrast the aloofness of the bourgeoisie to the practicality of sex, of elegance to depravity. Scenes of Séverine having mud thrown at her stick in the mind no less than the tentativeness with which she approaches the brothel for the first time, dressed in black, and ready to take flight at any moment. Couture by Yves Saint Laurent and lush photography drown us in luxurious chic. The stylish settings arouse our aesthetic senses, and the languorous pacing and emotional complexity keep us trying to figure it all out long before we realise just how difficult that is going to be.

Analysing it in Freudian or purely sexual terms is less than satisfying. The characters are convincing - the posh conservative elite, the matter-of-fact but certainly not coarse madame, the pervs who visit the brothel, and the psychologically conflicted Séverine through them all. It is hardly a plea for sexual liberation - the men, even one that Séverine takes a fancy to, are pretty lowlife. Their strange fantasy requirements mete out the most fascinating tableau of perversions but even more fascinating is what we don't see: such as what is in the box brought by the Chinaman. We are forced to identify with Séverine - she is the most normal character - and yet the most convincing way to approach the film is one suggested by Buñuel himself, as a parable attacking the decadence of the bourgeoisie.

Chris Docker, **IMDB subscriber**

Every possible opportunity is offered by the plot-line to plunge this film into a sordid, cheap affair. But Luis Buñuel creates an eminently classy film that is a splendid piece of escapism for the viewer. Central to this is Catherine Deneuve who oozes such sophisticated sexuality that one becomes utterly immersed in her potentially dangerous adventure.

Despite having been married to her husband for over a year she has never slept with him. Her days are filled with nothing but lunch appointments, giving her plenty of time to fantasise about imaginary and humiliating liaisons, usually in the forest. After a conversation with a friend she becomes fascinated by the idea of brothels, the strangers that visit them and the utterly submissive role that she would play were she to be there. Plucking up her courage she goes to work in one but can only do afternoons, hence her new name: "Belle de Jour".

Her encounters with men become ever more titillating, with whips and coffins all in a day's work. Not surprisingly one of her clients becomes infatuated with her and therein lies an incredible twist to the story with Deneuve's world threatening to collapse around her. It is at this time, when you so badly want her to get away with her deception, that you realise what a spellbinding concoction is before you on the screen. Deneuve might well play the part of a deviant but it is Buñuel who gets the opportunity to delve deep into the audience's wildest fantasies.

Afua Hirsch **BBC films**