

Luis Buñuel: The Complete Films

by Bill Krohn
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Critics are people too. *The X List* proves it by gathering together articles written by members of the American-based National Society of Film Critics about a film that "turned them on". It could be Harvey Keitel's hulking nudity in *The Piano*, a sight notoriously appealing to heterosexual women. Or Louise Brooks's kooky bobbed hair in *Pandora's Box*. Or Linda Lovelace doing whatever she did in *Deep Throat*. Or Jenny Agutter's scarlet bloomers in *The Railway Children*, for goodness' sake: the choice was theirs.

Charles Taylor, of *The Star-Ledger* in Newark, New Jersey, seems to have the right idea. "Aesthetics are beside the point more often than critics dare to admit," he says. "There are plenty of movies we enjoy that aren't good movies."

I'm not sure whether he strengthens or weakens his case by choosing to go weak at the knees over the 1980 porn movie *Talk Dirty to Me*. In the same spirit, Desson Thomson, of *The Washington Post*, admits that he finds Vittorio De Sica's *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* "vaguely stuffy and pretentious", but the whole dreary spectacle is turned into a wet dream by the presence in the film of Dominique Sanda.

Elsewhere there is a pleasing abundance of idiosyncratic predilections. "I so wanted to be Ann-Margret," writes Jami Bernard of *Bye Bye Birdie*, while Stephanie Zacharek mysteriously comments: "Before there was Jimmy Page, there was Amy Jolly" — Marlene Dietrich's character in Josef von Sternberg's *Morocco*.

Basic Instinct is hailed as a "veritable geyser of

pathology" and Ken Russell's *Crimes of Passion* as "the *Citizen Kane* of kink".

One critic is turned on by nuns, while another demands: "What is it about Brits?", before confessing how Julie Christie was supplanted in his affections by Imogen Stubbs.

But, being critics, some of these cinemagoers are not so straightforwardly aroused. One of them thrills to the outlandish right-wing politics of Ayn Rand in *The Fountainhead*, another to the sensuousness of the cinematography in *Days of Heaven*, while a third finds erotic the sheer incomprehensibility of *Mulholland Drive*.

Yet another finds in *The Age of Innocence* a reminder of her father, "whom I wanted to rescue from everything I found oppressive in suburban family life, beginning with my mother".

There are a few who let the side down completely, by betraying that what they find most stimulating about the movies is the brilliantly clever critical aperçus they come up with afterwards. But a few bad apples fail to spoil a lively and diverse barrel.

Surprisingly, only one movie by Luis Buñuel makes it into the pantheon of passion — his 1966 tale of a housewife turned whore, *Belle de Jour*. One might have expected the surrealist Spaniard's penchant for fetishism, perversity and reckless attacks on religion, plus some very presentable actresses, to have floated more critical boats.

I'm sure Bill Krohn would be surprised. In his masterly short survey of the Buñuel oeuvre, he compiles a list (copiously illustrated) of some of Buñuel's obsessions: legs, feet/shoes, the female back, breasts, young women with old men, guns, physical deformities, poultry, bell towers, insects, boxes and dreams. All that to choose from, and they still went for Linda Lovelace doing whatever she does in *Deep Throat*.

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