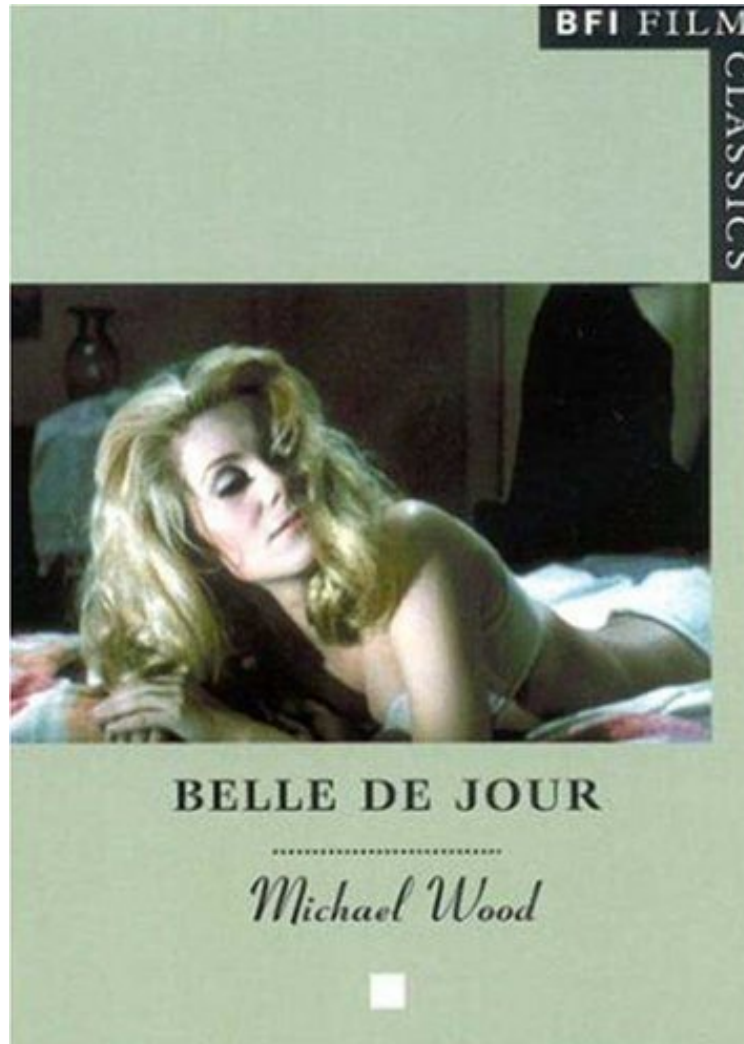


## Belle de Jour (BFI Film Classics)

*Michael Wood*

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**Michael Wood : Belle de Jour (BFI Film Classics)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Belle de Jour (BFI Film Classics):

17 of 18 people found the following review helpful. Bunuel needs a mind as open as his - Michael Wood has it.By darragh o'donoghueMichael Wood, the most elegant and enquiring literary critic of his generation, has also written widely on film. He is the author of books on Stendhal and Nabokov, and is currently writing a study of Proust. In other words, he is familiar and comfortable with Cultural Giants in a way most film critics and academics are not. This allows him to speculate and make seemingly random or wild connections on his subject with a confidence most film writers, slaves to theory and discipline, lack. This makes him the perfect interpreter of Bunuel, who needs such a suggestive approach, and whose critical star has fallen in the last two decades precisely because his work doesn't fit

neat frameworks. 'Belle De Jour' - the story of frigid doctor's wife Severine, who loves her husband but can only find sexual fulfilment working by day in a brothel - inaugurates the period known as 'late Bunuel', when the old Surrealist had access to bigger budgets, big stars and glossy colour. Because these films lack the abrasive iconoclasm of his most characteristic work, they are usually described as 'serene', 'mellow', repentant; Pauline Kael suggests they attain the 'path to grace'. Wood argues 'both Severine and the film hide the world behind an image of the world. We only see what they see or show; but we know it's not all there is. There is a serenity in 'Belle De Jour' and in all of Bunuel's late films, but it is not his. It is the false and fragile serenity of the society he pictures'. Wood suggests some of the ways Bunuel achieves this, in a gorgeously written study. He delineates the depth, subtleties and strategies of Bunuel's seemingly brusque and plain style. He discusses the brilliant actors - notably Catherine Deneuve, Michel Piccoli and Genevieve Page - and the importance of their screen personae to their roles. He shows how literally faithful Bunuel is to his source, Joseph Kessel's novel of the same name, and how radically he departs from its assumptions and form, transforming a traditionally psychological novel into an anti-character anti-narrative. The most brilliant section analyses the status of dreams, fantasies and memories in the film, and whether they displace the 'reality' of the film's fictional world, showing how Bunuel could claim to despise psychology (as a way of explaining the apparently accidental processes of the mind) and yet be devoted to Freud (as discoverer of the unconscious, 'one of the favourite playgrounds of accident'). He suggests that Bunuel replaces the reductive closure of a definitive resolution with a simultaneity of possible or alternative endings. Readers will get the most out of the monograph if they have the film handy. Wood looks at the major sequences in some depth (the opening landau fantasy; the shoes-on-staircase hesitation outside the bordello; the burly Asian with the humming box; the central sequence in the Duc's chateau; all of Husson's scenes; the enigmatic concluding five minutes). He focuses on pertinent, missable details, attending to nuance, repetition and variation. Not only do you get a more profound understanding of the film, but Bunuel's method, as stubbornly withheld as his heroine's inner life, opens bit by bit. You become so focused on each scene, you notice things Wood left out, or didn't underline. It's a rare director or critic that empowers his audience with the tools to answer back. Bunuel and Wood are less interested in interpreting a world, a film, a book or a character, than the very act of interpretation itself. 3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. AmbiguousBy Dash ManchetteThe movie Belle de Jour is a treat for anyone who has not yet seen it. Catherine Deneuve, always easy on the eyeballs, is wonderful in her portrayal of Severine, the Parisian housewife whose frigid sexuality towards her husband is matched by the inferno of her fantasy life. These fantasies of abuse and degradation come to life when Severine takes a day job at a brothel, taking whatever man comes her way. Michael Wood's analysis of the film in this BFI monograph is generally up to the task of enlightening the viewer about some important aspects of the movie. There are clearly several sequences that are not taking place within the real world of the characters, being instead Severine's fantasies or memories. Wood asks whether these fantasy sequences are actually more numerous than we thought. He provides evidence that many of the scenes the viewer takes as real may be something quite else altogether. Wood ties the movie's ambiguity nicely into its director's personal vision. Luis Bunuel was a Surrealist whose movies often shifted the focus of how we see the world, creating a vision recognizable enough as our own but with a focus just slightly off to make us question our assumptions. Bunuel applies this theory to the comfortable middle class aspirations of 1960s Parisians, still close enough to our own modern day world to hit close to the mark. Just how well do we know what goes on in the heads of the normal couple next door? Wood's analysis unfortunately starts to fall apart in the final chapter of BELLE DE JOUR, in which he discusses Bunuel's later works. It simply is not as coherent as the rest of the book. The chapter is short, though, and its deficiencies easily forgiven in the context of a useful book about a classic movie.

Severine (Catherine Deneuve) is a listless haute bourgeoisie wife with a secret afternoon life of prostitution. Her life twists repression and guilt together with uninhibited behaviour, strangled libido with its liberated counterpart. Luis Bunuel was catapulted into cinematic history by his groundbreaking Dali collaboration, *Un Chien Andalou*, in 1929, but it is *Belle de Jour* (1967) which inaugurates the extraordinary late phase of his work. It is a film shimmering with reflections on truth, fiction and fantasy, in addition to caustic social insight, as it tells the story of a woman clearing her mind, perhaps, of its ghosts.

From the Back Cover Severine (Catherine Deneuve) is a listless haute bourgeoisie wife with a secret afternoon life of prostitution. Her life twists repression and guilt together with uninhibited behaviour, strangled libido with its liberated counterpart. Luis Bunuel was catapulted into cinematic history by his groundbreaking Dali collaboration, *Un Chien Andalou*, in 1929, but it is *Belle de Jour* (1967) which inaugurates the extraordinary late phase of his work. It is a film shimmering with reflections on truth, fiction and fantasy, in addition to caustic social insight, as it tells the story of a woman clearing her mind, perhaps, of its ghosts. About the Author Michael Wood, Chair of the English department at Princeton University, is author of *America in the Movies* (Columbia University Press, 1989), as well as books on Nabokov and Stendhal.