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# FILM

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## Cobblers from France

Paris Porn—By JOHN WEIGHTMAN

THE FRENCH GOVERNMENT has just announced a heavy tax on pornographic films, to the great indignation of film-makers and critics, who see this measure both as an insidious form of censorship and as a threat to the whole film industry. Some film-makers claim to use part of the proceeds from sex-films to finance other projects, and they are now going to be milked of their profits, as if the naughty cinemas were licensed brothels directly feeding the inland revenue. At the same time, since French films are classified after they have been made, and not beforehand on the basis of the scenario, directors who wish to reach the general public paying average prices will have to curb their artistic freedom, in case their work is put into the erotic category.

Perhaps the government has decided that a heavy financial levy is, in fact, the best means of curbing pornography without raising the awkward principle of censorship. If so, the remnants of bourgeois morality are simply operating in a timid, roundabout way. On the other hand, the remnants of morality combined with hypocrisy may have led the government to conclude that it should have a larger share of the fortunes made by such films as *Last Tango in Paris* and *Emmanuelle*. France was behind for a while in the race towards permissiveness, but now she is catching up and Paris could again become the naughty capital of the world. If overt cinematographic sex is here to stay, like alcohol, the public will presumably go on paying for it through the nose, as they do for whisky. But, in either case, the problem of the rights and wrongs of pornography remains unsolved, either by the government or its critics.

It has been stirring again in my mind, as I have reflected on the two latest bluish films to arrive from France: *Les valseuses* by Bernard Blier (Curzon Cinema) and *Grandeur nature* by Luis Berlanga (Jacey in the Strand). At least one can say that, in both cases, the outspokenness is

essential to the theme; without their obscenity, they would not exist, and if any form of censorship were restored, such films would not be made. The question is: what are the degrees of intelligence and acceptability in obscenity itself?

THE ORIGINAL NOVEL of *Les valseuses* was a best-seller in France, and the film, if I remember rightly, was treated with some respect by the critics when it was first shown about two years ago. Certainly, it is not flabby, chocolate-box porn, like the egregious *Emmanuelle*. It is, on the surface at least, crisp, lively and aggressive. The significance of the slang title (the swinging ones = testicles) is, I take it, that *les valseuses font valser les jeunes gens*, young men are led a dance by their own superabundant virility. The mindless vitality of thugs is, presumably, undirected or non-sublimated sexual energy. At any rate, this film seems to be by *Easy Rider* out of *Clockwork Orange*. The two jolly heroes roam across France stealing cars, living on their wits and picking up women, in a sort of ejaculatory dream of freedom. Being traditional French *révoltés*, they have no patience with ordinary morality. They bully a harmless middle-aged woman, they pick up a girl and offer her as payment to a man who has rendered them a service, they terrify a young mother in a railway carriage and force her to give them suck, and they saw through the axle of a car belonging to a man who has offended them.

All this, to my mind, is detestable. Bullies, even dashing bullies, and particularly when they hunt in pairs or gangs, are reverting to animal status without having the excuse of total animal innocence; sperm may be a cause but it cannot, in a human being, be a justification. Also, while the film is much more intelligent in its cynicism than *Emmanuelle*, it is basically sentimental in that, consciously or unconsciously, it softens the misdemeanours of the young men with humour

and through appeals to anti-Establishment prejudice.

The main girl the heroes pick up, who seems at first sight to be a victim, turns out to have no more scruples than they themselves. Besides, she is frigid, and after they have exhausted themselves in trying vainly to arouse her, she is suddenly and unexpectedly satisfied by an unprepossessing individual, a genuine homicidal criminal, in comparison with whom they are a couple of bungling amateurs. Jeanne Moreau figures, in an overheated little episode, as a severe and frantic woman, who has just emerged from prison, haunted by the sexual diminution of the menopause. The heroes, showing that their anarchistic hearts, as well as their other attributes, are in the right place, persuade her to accompany them, give her a first-class meal, and then unite with her jointly.

But what, in the end, do these anarchists really want, and what, for a time, do they actually enjoy? An unlimited supply of money, buddy-love with heterosexual sex on the side, slap-up meals, a powerful car and a nice *résidence secondaire* with fishing along a picturesque, nearby canal. The ideal is perfectly petit-bourgeois and even male chauvinist, and its only peculiarity is its criminal achievement outside the bourgeois context. A slight hint of poetic justice is suggested at the end, when the two heroes and their female crony drive off, unwittingly, in the car with the sawn-through axle. However, this is just another weakness; in the world of pure revolt, there can, by definition, be no such thing as poetic justice. So I would write off *Les valseuses* as being interestingly and repellingly symptomatic rather than good. But no doubt one can say, as usual, that it is better to have the symptoms expressed, and exposed for what they are, instead of being concealed by inhibitions.

A SIMILAR DEFENCE could probably be made out for *Grandeur nature*, the kinkiest statement of misogyny I think I have ever seen. Berlanga is said to be a disciple of Buñuel, but the flavour of the film is nearer to the self-degradation of *Last Tango in Paris*, since it is a sort of woman-hater's *Lost Weekend*. Michel Piccoli, a middle-aged Parisian dentist with a posh practice, a fashionable wife and a long backlog of mistresses, has grown tired of the adjustments necessary with real women, and has ordered, from Japan, a life-size plastic doll with all the necessary bumps and apertures. He brings her out of her polystyrene sarcophagus as if she were an Egyptian princess in a perfect state of preservation. He coos over her, takes her to a fashion-house to have her

modishly dressed, weds her to the sound of the Wedding March on his Hi-Fi, copulates with her under the shower, and eventually does with her all the things that gentlemen can do with ladies. It is important to note that he records most of this on his closed-circuit TV (cf. *A Bigger Splash*), so as to be able to play it back to himself and comment on it to his dumb plastic blonde.

The sight of Piccoli in black underwear doing a Marlene Dietrich, or naked under a fur-coat imitating Bette Davis, for the edification of the Japanese artefact is one of the weirder experiences provided by the film. Almost as peculiar is the passage in which he takes the doll to meet his mother, and she accepts the situation with smiling broadmindedness, and even gives him the key to her Paris flat so that he can pursue his idyll in comfort after leaving his wife. In the bad old days before permissiveness, I occasionally heard it said that very possessive French bourgeois mothers would rather their sons debauched the maid or committed incest with their sisters than that they should get involved with strange women outside the family. But this is the first time I have seen it suggested that a mother might be glad that her son was having an affair with a doll, which she dresses up in the clothes she herself wore when young. At this point, Narcissus, Oedipus and Onan seem to be joining hands to dance a very queer round.

THE MORAL APPEARS to be, however, that even love with an unresisting doll has to be seasoned with drama. The dentist, who by now is cracking up, deliberately arranges a videotape recording of the rape of the doll by his Spanish concierge, so that he can gloat over the scene and beat her for being a trollop. When she is later stolen and violated by a crowd of immigrant Spanish workmen in their bachelor dormitory-hut, he loses his grip altogether and drives his car into the Seine, where he sinks but the doll floats. A "woman" has killed him in the end.

It is difficult to say what the director intended. Perhaps the film is just a macabre joke, made with the dirty-raincoat trade in mind, or perhaps, since Piccoli is in it, it is meant more seriously as an allegory of the tragic dilemma of the male who cannot get on with females and therefore tries to live out both sexual roles himself, with the help of a dummy, in a frenzy of erotic ventriloquism. I am surer about the general effect; it is dangerously stimulating. After gazing at the wretched doll for an hour and a half, one longs for all women, or any woman, *emmerdeuse ou emmerdante*, with a human light in her eyes and some initiative in her limbs.

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# MEN & IDEAS

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## Dante Now

*The Gossip of Eternity*—By GEORGE STEINER

IN HIS ESSAY "Talking About Dante", Osip Mandelstam compares the *Divina Commedia* to a crystallographic growth in which the unceasing drive towards the creation of interlocking forms penetrates and unites the whole.

Thus, one has to imagine how it would be if bees had worked at the creation of this thirteen-thousand-faceted shape, bees endowed with instinctive stereometric genius, who attracted more and still more bees as they were needed. The work of these bees, who always keep an eye on the whole, is not equally difficult at the various stages of the process. Their cooperation broadens and becomes more complex as they proceed with the formation of the combs, by means of which space virtually arises out of itself.

There is a comparable simile for dynamic coherence in Pope's *Essay on Man*:

*The spider's touch, how exquisitely fine!  
Feels at each thread, and lives along the line.*

Crystals, honeycombs, the vital reticulations of the spider's web: each is an analogy towards Mandelstam's exultant find that the entirety of the *Commedia* "is one single unified and indivisible stanza." A stanza of 14,233 verses composed, so far as the evidence tells, over ten years of personal dislocation and political tumult. This live compaction, whose validation depends throughout on the quality of our reading, on our capacity, itself triggered and disciplined by the poem, to keep in reciprocal and equilibrating motion the overall design and the local intensity, obviously derives from several axes of relation ("one integral development of a crystallographic theme").

One axis is contextual. To cite a banal example (which may be best, inhibiting, as it does, the notion that one has something novel to contribute, yet showing, like the teasing ridge ahead of a mountain-walker, that there is always more perspective, more height to be worked for): the *Divina Commedia* has no direct knowledge of Homer. The Middle Ages draw their Homeric material from the compilation of the so-called Dictys Cretensis, in which Ulysses is done to

death by Telegonus, his son by Circe. None the less, Dante is the only "modern" (until Joyce) to have augmented fundamentally the reach of Homeric meaning, to have pierced to the core of that meaning by adding "what was already there." He is able to do so because the surrounding, sustaining literary-philosophic context is of an authority of suggestion and continuity so firm as to compel but also hold in place Dante's intuition of the Homeric sense. He visions the errant son of Laertes through a Latin perspective, through Virgil's own distancing and intimations of an archaic, lost excess of individual heroic stature—such vision through and past Virgil being at once the cognitive and the dramatic method of the *Commedia*'s concordance with the past.

In Book V of Cicero's *De finibus bonorum et malorum*, Dante finds a crucial gloss on the song of the Sirens. It was neither the sweetness of their voices nor the charm of their repertoire which riveted the passing voyager, but their profession of knowledge—*sed quia multa se scire profitebantur*. Little wonder, observes Cicero, that a man avid of intelligence (*mirum sapientiae cupido*) might prefer their solicitation even to a return home. Horace makes a comparable point in *Epistles* I, ii. The negative, which will be key to Dante's account of Ulysses' end, lurks, between the lines as it were, of Seneca's 88th moral letter, *Ad Lucilium*. The man, adverts Seneca, must have sailed outside our known world, *extra notum nobis orbem* (as the Genoese Vivaldi brothers were to do in 1291, disappearing without trace). We also, navigators on a daily, housebound scale, meet with fierce storms of the spirit, and our depravities thrust us into the proud miseries that afflicted Ulysses. A passing, almost casual moral *exemplum*, of the kind in which Seneca abounds, but nodal in the weave of reference and cross-reference.

THERE ARE FURTHER threads. Brunetto Latini, himself a talismanic figure of excellence and errancy in the *Inferno*, wrote a poem which told