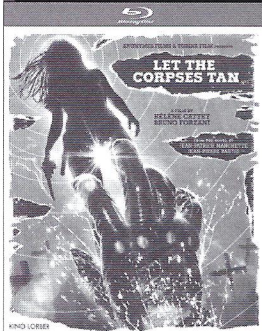


LET THE CORPSES TAN

Directed by Hélène Cattet and Bruno Forzani
(2017) Kino Lorber Blu-ray / DVD



Over the course of three feature films, French filmmakers Hélène Cattet and Bruno Forzani continue to forge a fascinating body of work. Their films draw heavily on the visual and thematic tropes of Italian genre cinema of the 1970s (in particular giallo films), while playfully—some might say perversely—refashioning these borrowed elements into startling new contexts: *Amer* explores the sexual awakening of a repressed young woman, while *The Strange Color of Your Body's Tears* parses some particularly brutal marital conflicts. These films are long on style, mood and texture, yet quite freeform when it comes to narrative development. In a way, that's entirely fitting, since, like the films they draw

from, they are first and foremost meant to be ravishing sensory experiences, above and beyond paltry left-brain considerations of logic and plot.

With *Let the Corpses Tan*, Cattet and Forzani do in fact introduce a lot more storyline, you might even say a surfeit of it, all the better to thoroughly deconstruct every bit of it by the film's hallucinatory finale. Not coincidentally, this is also their first film to be based on a literary source: the 1971 novel of the same name by Jean-Patrick Manchette and Jean-Pierre Bastid that was published under Gallimard's legendary *Série noire* imprint—a line of mystery and thriller novels which, back in the late 1940s, loaned its name to the nascent film noir genre.

At bottom, *Let the Corpses Tan* is a heist film, down to the recurrent time stamps that recall the precise plotting of caper films like Stanley Kubrick's *The Killing* or John Huston's *The Asphalt Jungle*. Here the target is an armored car laden with gold bullion that's waylaid along a serpentine stretch of coastal road by a trio of career criminals. But, as was the case with those two classics, even the best laid plans tend to go sideways. And *Let the Corpses Tan* soon turns into a tense daylong standoff between police and the robbers set amid the sprawling Mediterranean ruins where the gang are hiding out.

But *Let the Corpses Tan* is not constructed like your typical heist film. Disorientation is the dominant mood. Character identities and interrelationships have to be pieced together on the fly. Surreal scenes of sadomasochistic sexuality come out of nowhere. They may be dreams (but whose?) or even—as the disc's commentary track suggests—flashbacks to earlier seasons in the sun. We see a particular event occur multiple times, allowing us to register various characters' responses. At one point, the time code suddenly runs back to zero, not so much to reset itself, as to abolish the notion of comprehensible timekeeping altogether.

Like Cattet and Forzani's earlier films, much of the impact of *Let the Corpses Tan* comes from Bernard Beets' snap-crackle editing rhythm, where the potency lies as much in what it withholds or elides as in what it reveals, and Manuel Dacosse's densely saturated, nearly expressionistic cinematography. The film's world is one in which objects (weapons laid out like surgical instruments, a pig roasting on a spit over an open fire, a gold lighter) carry as much weight as its characters. This makes perfect sense when you consider that the characters ultimately treat each other as just so many useful or disposable objects.

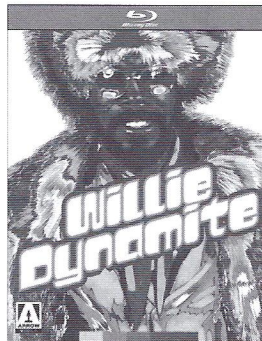
Kino's Blu-ray looks spectacular, perfectly capturing the film's variegated visual palette—from the sun-blasted browns and oranges of the Corsican landscape to the deep blues and tenebrous blacks of the nighttime scenes—while preserving a properly cinematic grain level all the while. The French-language track is available in both DTS Master Audio surround and stereo tracks, with the 5.1 really bringing out the ambient sound effects (those initial gunshots really set the tone) as well as the sporadic needle-drops lifted from classic Italian genre soundtracks composed by the likes of Nico Fidenco and Ennio Morricone. (The "Solo Grida" from Morricone's score for *Who Saw Her Die?* is used to particularly astonishing effect here.)

The audio commentary track is provided by film critic Alexandra Heller-Nicholas and Queensland Film Festival director John Edmond, both of whom have interviewed the directors in the process of putting together an upcoming critical anthology on their work. It's an amiable, occasionally uproarious listen, chock full of production history as well as analytical insights into the film's striking visual symbolism. Mirroring the filmmakers' working relationship, Heller-Nicholas delves into the frequent references to Italian genre cinema, while Edmond tackles the more technical aspects of the shoot and its links to experimental cinema. Particularly striking is the comparison the commentators make between Cattet and Forzani's film and Georges Bataille's notorious erotic novel *The Story of the Eye*, which is similarly structured around an interlocking series of visual metaphors.

Budd Wilkins

WILLIE DYNAMITE

Directed by Gilbert Moses
(1974) Arrow Video Blu-ray



Growing up in the late 60s or early 70s, many *Scream* readers will remember Gordon, the nice-guy science teacher from *Sesame Street*. But Roscoe Orman, the actor who played him from 1974 to 2018, appeared as the titular pimp character in the 1974 blaxploitation flick *Willie Dynamite* (the same year he began his run on the children's show).

By the time *Willie Dynamite* was made, the blaxploitation cycle was in full swing, and African-American actors were playing all sorts of wild characters, such as vampires, hit men, and pimps. While history likes to remember there being far more pimp characters than there actually were, *Willie Dynamite* is an example of one such film that did exist. It followed on the heels of the successful Michael Campus picture *The Mack*, released in 1974, and helped pave the way for the lesser-quality Matt Cimber-helmed *The Candy Tangerine Man* the following year.

Written by Ron Cutler, who later wrote the Ray Liotta/Keifer Sutherland-starrer *Article 99*, and directed by Gilbert Moses, who later received an Emmy nomination for co-directing the mini-series *Roots*, *Willie Dynamite* depicts the epic rise and fall of its pimp protagonist. The film, one of the upper tier blaxploitation pictures, does a decent job depicting the manipulative head games that take place between a pimp and his "ho." In fact, it captures this aspect of the material better than most other blaxploitation flicks.

However, the film is not without problems. *Willie Dynamite* never quite achieves all it could have, due to it being a major studio Richard Zanuck/David Brown production (the same team who gave us *Jaws* just a year later). As entertaining as the film is, it feels very much like it was made by a group of predominantly white people without a finger on the pulse of the streets or even black society. Where the lower-budget films managed to capture some of the essence of the street life they depicted, *Willie Dynamite* feels very separated from that, as if it was crafted by filmmakers lacking this sensibility—it's what an alien who was new to earth might make in trying to emulate what it perceived to be black culture. For evidence of this, one needs to look no further than the outlandish, "stylish" wardrobes the characters wear in the film. Even in the 1970s, a guy, pimp or not, would have been stabbed to death in a minute for wearing this garb in the streets. Willie Dynamite's wardrobe looks more like outfits Liberace might perform in than the clothing of a street hustler. The film is cartoony, feeling very much like an urban fairy tale, but somehow that quality (for lack of a better term) gives the picture a pleasing kitsch value far greater than the average blaxploitation movie. It's not a documentary by any stretch, but it does its best to entertain.

One thing that's commendable about the production is its depiction of an extremely unlikely protagonist. Willie Dynamite isn't an anti-hero, he's a straight-up prick. Credit the filmmakers for having the courage to put such an unlikely bastard at the center of an otherwise watered-down big budget Hollywood production.

Director Gilbert Moses, who also composed songs for *Willie Dynamite* ("Willie D.", "King Midas", "Keep On Movin' On"), returned to the blaxploitation genre for 1979's *The Fish That Saved Pittsburgh*, a ridiculous story that combines astrology with pro basketball!

Willie Dynamite isn't the pinnacle of the blaxploitation cycle, but it's better than the majority. (I watched most of them while writing my 2009 book *Reflections on Blaxploitation*.) There are no social messages here, no lessons to be learned, the film just being a straightforward tale of a pimp and his stable. The direction is lacking, its appearance flat, oftentimes looking like a network movie of the week, but the performances are first-rate, with Orman leading the charge, delivering an impressive turn. It's mediocre in terms of blaxploitation—it isn't even the best of the pimp sub-genre (that designation going to *The Mack*). It is, however, a solid popcorn flick in the B+ range that often gets overlooked when cineastes discuss these films, and that's a shame.

There are next to no extras on Arrow's North American Blu-ray release beyond a commentary by Sergio Mims, a *Huffington Post* film critic and producer of the *Bad Mutha Film Show*, and the original theatrical trailer. The U.K. edition (also from Arrow) adds the featurette *Kiss My Baad Asss*, a guide to blaxploitation, hosted by actor and musician Ice-T, and featuring interviews with Richard Roundtree, Melvin van Peebles, Isaac Hayes and others, omitted domestically most likely due to overseas rights. Even though it's unfortunate that this great extra is missing from the American release, it's good to see that *Willie Dynamite* is back on our shores.

Andrew J. Rausch