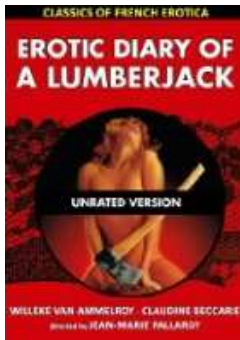




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Erotic Diary of a Lumberjack



Director: Jean-Marie Pallardy (France, 1974)
Studio: MVD
Aspect Ratio: 1.66:1 Letterboxed Widescreen
Region: 0
Running Time: 94 minutes

Review posted on 26/07/2009 by Robert Cettl

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REVIEW:

Director Jean-Marie Pallardy attracted headlines when French officials wanted to ban his feature *My Body Burns* for its daring depiction of a government official involved in sexual perversity and murder. Indeed, throughout his career Pallardy had to face aspersions on his films for their sexual content and their challenges to Patriarchal sexual propriety. Yet, although he worked with such French hardcore actresses as the infamous Brigitte Lahaie, Pallardy always insisted that his films be described as bawdy entertainments rather than "pornography". Pallardy's *Erotic Diary of a Lumberjack* (on DVD now as part of the "Classics of French Erotica" series) perhaps best epitomizes this interest in bawdy adult comedy and social satire.

Risque, suggestive dialogue and playful sexuality adorn *Erotic Diary of a Lumberjack*, about a Professor who retreats to the country on the eve of his winning a Nobel prize. There, he changes his clothes for those of a scarecrow and runs off, soon becoming involved with an open-air lumberjack society ruled by sexual pleasure - opening a brothel society in the woods. French authorities do not approve and so send in agents to dismantle the operation before it can result in bad publicity and a morals scandal - they need their men in positions of power to be responsibly chaste (or married - as was the pressure affecting a similar ageing man in *My Body Burns*). Director Pallardy uses this scenario to develop themes that had infiltrated his work in *My Body Burns*: namely - Patriarchal morality (and hypocrisy) in the so-called Age of Permissiveness. Pallardy's protagonist is an old man who tires of the moral and behavioural constraints that Patriarchal French society exerts on men of his age - specifically the impetus towards moral propriety.

"best epitomizes this interest in bawdy adult comedy and social satire"

Pallardy frequently uses older men as the protagonists in his films and it is difficult not to see them as stand-ins for the director himself. Here, the Professor, beyond middle age, is convinced that sexual repression (as enshrined in Patriarchy) makes men old before their time and so takes every advantage to pursue young willing women (beginning with his maid - a former prostitute, lovely in revealing uniform in a titillating romp in a bear skin rug). For Pallardy, the Professor's plight is symbolic: at a crossroads in his mid-life he must choose between propriety and pleasure, between the responsibilities of a Nobel-prize winner or the debaucheries of the pleasure principle. Although for Pallardy and the Professor there is no dichotomy here between them, French Patriarchy will simply not permit responsible, old men to do as they please, making them unable to enjoy the freedoms accorded young

women thanks to the sexual revolution.

Enamoured of the freedom of living by the pleasure principle, the Professor sets the idyllic open-air society as his ideal communal brothel, setting up a surveillance system and drugging local officials to secure their co-operation. Soon, his personal commune turns into a den of sexual activity, the couplings within which Pallardy reveals with more passion and attention to female pleasure than in his previous work – women's faces in sexual ecstasy abound, inter-cut with much nudity and sexual groping / coupling. One moral irony that Pallardy concentrates on is that of "procurement" – the women here have abundant pleasure but in that they have been recruited by men for the purposes of such sex, the men are considered pimps and their conduct illegal under Patriarchy. In this, Pallardy also parodies the romantic ideal of the retreat to nature as a genuine means of self-actualization, here equating nature with sexual pleasure and Patriarchal civilization with repression through the construction of moral codes in defiance of the natural world.

" a daring depiction of a government official involved in sexual perversity and murder"

However, the Professor is also a voyeur and has set up surveillance cameras in every cabin in his little brothel, finding the results "instructive". Here, Pallardy suggests that pornography as the recording of sexual activity is in essence created by Patriarchal paradox – the need to see what would be repressed, an idea that Michel Foucault would elaborate in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality* and indeed informed European exploitation as a genre throughout the 1970s. However, the liberation of sexual fantasy soon segues into the liberation of sexual pathology – in the privacy of the brothel room, male clients (old and young) are free to indulge their every desire and overcome every repression heaped upon them by their responsibility to Patriarchal propriety. The brothel is thus both central to, and independent of, Patriarchal society as much as they would seek to destroy it: the pimp here is the liberator, freeing male desire from Patriarchal constraint by providing willing young women with whom to overcome Patriarchy's sexual repressions.

It is inevitable though that men's baser urges –represented by pack rape (at the cruel instigation of the Professor's business partner) – will also surface in a sexual environment devoid of constraint. Pallardy essays the line between the Rabelais-inspired bawdiness of his early scenes and the sexual oppression of rape, the latter sequence clearly troubling – the absence of pleasure on a woman's face during such is horrible. Such is the moral reckoning which the Professor must face – although his interest is pleasure, there exist men who see women as their possessions and will take such by force, for fun, as if entitled to pleasure above all (a violent reaction against Patriarchal asexual propriety but inherent in any concept of male dominated power). Director Pallardy is aware of this aspect of masculinity and loathes it – rape for some men is fun – a fantasy Pallardy acknowledges exists but does not condone and sees as ugly and repellently un-erotic.

The point is that sexuality is an anarchic force which cannot be contained by moral propriety as proven by the sexual revolution. Being anarchic, it is dangerous if left unchecked. Yet, there is a generational allegory here too – the Professor's son reacts against his father's sense of sexual liberation to assert his own moral code, finally accepting the joy of sex in defiance of police authority. Being a comedy, the moral implications of this are nicely resolved and even the rapist mends his ways to respect the woman he would otherwise violate. In this sense, his actions were merely a symbolic expression of power – a man threatened with the perceived loss of his personal power and reacting by force – and when shown the proper order of things will redeem himself. The real enemy of sexual liberation is the police, Patriarchy's officiators of acceptable moral conduct. But in the true spirit of bawd, policemen too can be tempted by the joy of free and open sex and in a gesture of hope that was denied the elderly man in *My Body Burns*, who was suppressed and contained by Patriarchy, the sexual idyll is here allowed to triumph.

In the way of special features on this DVD is a documentary on Pallardy, extended scenes in original French and a rare collection of photographs from the director's private collection.

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