

**A Fatal Attraction: the fine line between eroticism and horror in *Baba Yaga* (Corrado Farina, 1973)**

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In Britain there is a comic book tradition which is perhaps best demonstrated by the cartoonish antics in *The Beano* or the swearsy childishness of *Viz*, whereas in Continental Europe the comic has been viewed as an art form that could also be appreciated by adults. This perhaps explains the popularity of 'Eurotica'; sexually explicit albums such as Jean-Claude Forest's *Barbarella* in France, and those by Italian artist Milo Manara, whose comics featured amongst other things a machine for unchaining women's libidos. Where those examples are somewhat fanciful, dabbling with pop-culture and science fiction, another artist created striking pen and ink drawings with their basis in serious erotic literature. Guido Crepax, from Milan, claimed to hate violence. This may be true yet he put the characters in his stories through all kinds of pain, usually in the pursuit of sexual fulfillment, in both his original work and adaptations of *Emmanuelle* and *The Story of O*. His best known albums are the continuing adventures of Valentina, a photographer who bore a striking resemblance to silent-movie star Louise Brooks. She frequently experienced erotic sado-masochistic encounters with both men and women, and sometimes dreamed of parading naked in front of Nazi officers. Crepax began drawing these albums in the late 1960s and continued through to the 1990s (he died in 2003), and they can be seen as either a celebration or a critique of the bourgeois pleasures available to young Italians. The albums were sexy and surreal, embracing the dreamlike possibilities of the comic art form.



One of Valentina's earliest encounters was with Baba Yaga, a witch whose roots lay in Russian folktale. Instead of living in a hut on the edge of a forest however, and without the traditional iron teeth and long nose, this incarnation was an thin older woman (with a penchant for bondage) living a comfortable life in Milan. It was this comic book story that formed the basis of the 1973 movie *Baba Yaga*, directed by Corrado Farina. In the film Valentina (Isabelle De Funès, exuding a vulnerability and breezy sexual confidence) is a Marxist fashion photographer in Milan. She is intelligent, talented and alluring, so naturally leftist intellectuals want to sleep with her. On her way home from a typically swinging party Valentina is almost run down by a car. The driver is none other than Baba Yaga, as played by former Hollywood sex symbol Carrol Baker and therefore far more attractive than in Crepax's drawings. It appears that fate has brought them together, or so Baba Yaga thinks. On her first visit to Baba Yaga's house Valentina masturbates in the attic. Could it be that she is already under the witch's spell? It is the sight of a female doll dressed in leather that

seems to have awakened her sexual urges, denied earlier at the party.



The film draws on horror traditions most famously realised in Alberto Cavalcanti's ventriloquist's dummy sequence in *Dead of Night* (1945), or the murderous antics of the *Devil Doll* (Lindsay Shonteff, 1964). Baba Yaga gives Valentina the doll as a gift, but this is no child's toy. Naked under studded leather straps and with long, thick red hair, this doll appears to have been picked up in a Soho sex dungeon and soon begins infiltrating Valentina's increasingly bizarre dreams. As a fully-grown woman (played by Ely Galleani), this living, mute doll is a striking image, perhaps one of the most memorable from this period of Italian cinema, particularly when she kisses Valentina tenderly whilst the latter is wearing Nazi uniform. There is a permeability of reality to these sequences. It is either a doll seemingly brought to life through Baba Yaga's magic, or by Valentina's repressed bisexual urges. Either way the doll is given the power to kill (and wield bondage equipment). Director Corrada Farina appears to make a connection to *The Golem*, the

Jewish legend of a man made of clay given life by a magic talisman or incantations. The Golem could then be used for good or ill depending on who is controlling it. Valentina and her boyfriend Arno (played by Italian horror regular George Eastman) watch the silent film version of *The Golem* (Carl Borse, Paul Wegener, 1920) in a cinema, finding it disturbing. As they leave they pass posters featuring Frankenstein's monster (as played by Fred Gwynne in 'The Munsters', a somewhat unusual choice which perhaps highlights Farina's playful sense of humour). Mary Shelley's creation of dead matter brought to life is a clear descendent of The Golem legend, so it is perhaps being suggested here that real-life sex dolls under the control of their creators are the next logical step forward.



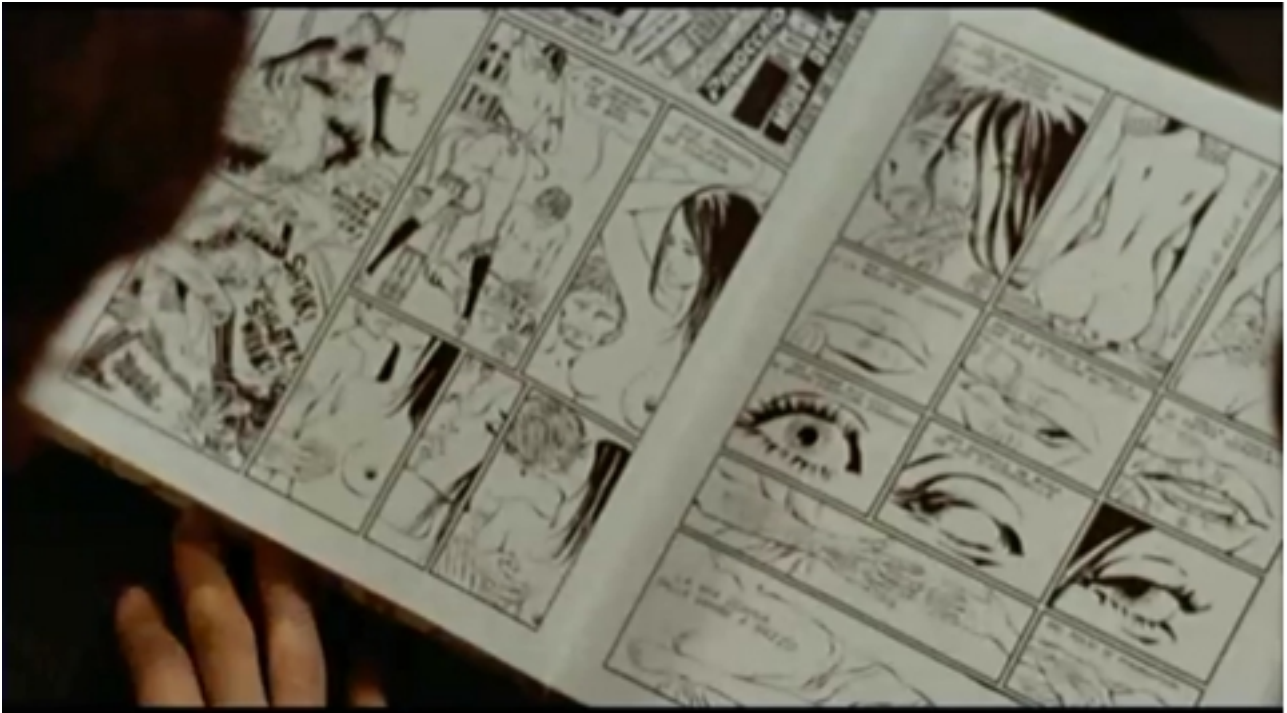
Baba Yaga's tall, oak-panelled house comes with one feature that could potentially damage its real-estate value: a bottomless pit leading straight to hell, or at least some sort of nebulous otherworld (Joe Dante drew on this idea for his recent feature *The Hole* [2009], which, as well as featuring a bottomless hole to hell in the basement of a family

home, also included a killer doll). Valentina is afraid of this big, deep hole, despite Baba Yaga's calm reassurance as she covers it with a rug. The scene is laced with sexual implications, coming as it does immediately after Baba Yaga's interruption of Valentina 'flying solo' in the attic. It suggests that Valentina may be on a voyage of sapphic self-discovery, but it is far too soon for her to fully commit. Baba Yaga is more than a little sinister, but the majority of the film's running time allows the audience to decide whether she really is a witch or merely a predatory lesbian, looking to seduce younger women with her wealth and sophistication. Arguably Farina makes little distinction, perhaps equating lesbianism with danger. Even Valentina is confused, doubting her own feelings until Arno sees for himself evidence of magical activity.

Sex in *Baba Yaga* is equated with social status and political power. There is a dichotomy here in that sexuality is either empowering or humiliating. Valentina takes photos of semi-naked women and men that she believes will help fuel the impending revolution, but in her dreams she is made to stand in her underwear before Nazis, both male and female. She also willingly submits to being stripped, chained and then whipped by Baba Yaga and her living doll. Baba Yaga believes that this degrading seduction is for Valentina's own good, ultimately leading to a new sexual awakening, an idea explored in the writings of De Sade. Whether this attitude pushes *Baba Yaga* towards the horror camp perhaps depends on the audience. Valentina seems to be living in an erotic, psychedelic nightmare, but it is one of her own choosing, or at least one in which she is complicit. Ultimately the behaviour exhibited in the film by Baba Yaga leads to her downfall, literally, as she falls down her own hole, taking the remains of the broken sex doll with her. Is this a Freudian punishment? Valentina is rescued by Arno and is restored to a heteronormative world, ready, at least in comic form, for more sexually-charged adventures. It is a pity more adventures of Valentina as written by Crepax were not adapted. Just imagine the *Emmanuelle* series

with less philosophising and more pop art-inspired surrealism.

With its dreamlike imagery, elliptical editing and languorous pacing, *Baba Yaga* is a film which can either entrance or frustrate. Like other Euro comic book adaptations such as *Danger: Diabolik* (Mario Bava, 1968) and *Barbarella* (Roger Vadim, 1968), it closely captures the visual style of the original art work, which was serious in tone yet still in step with the fashion of the 1960s. The set design features a lot of strong contrast between light and dark, but what really separates this film from those others is Farina's attempt to actually replicate the still nature of the albums by shooting some sequences in grainy black and white photography, such as when Valentina makes love to Arno. Like Crepax's original art, the film does not shy away from nudity and erotic imagery, with even the game Carol Baker going fully nude (a scene cut from some of the versions of *Baba Yaga* currently available). Farina seems determined to show that Italy in 1973 was still swinging, despite the 1960s being over everywhere else. Various people in the opening scene's party, one naked, one named Guido (a nod to Crepax), discuss the problems of getting political messages into movies whilst browsing Italian comic albums (also known as fumetti). Valentina happens to believe that Jean-Luc Godard's last decent film was *Pierrot le Fou* (1965), as his politics are now too overt. Another character is an underground comic book artist who worries about becoming commercially successful, and Arno is a director of commercials for television. The audience gets to see him at work with his film crew on the streets of Milan, raising awareness of the artifice of the very movie we are watching. *Baba Yaga* is almost post-modern before the term was invented.



Guido Crepax created a very specific brand of high-class Eurotica that eschewed narrative convention for dreamlike states with no clear delineation between sleep and waking, and his work showed its influence on other Italian filmmakers (including Lucio Fulci in his film *Una sull'altra* [*One on Top of the Other*, 1969], where Elsa Martinelli plays a Valentina-like character) . Keeping the reader unsure of whether Valentina is a victim of her own fantasies or not is part of their enigmatic appeal, and this has been expertly carried over into the movie. Corrada Farina's version is a landmark film in comic book adaptation, and for its fascinating examination of female sexuality and the fine line between the erotic and the horrific.

*Baba Yaga* is available on R2 DVD from Shameless Entertainment, and on R1 DVD and blu ray from Blue Underground. It can also be streamed from LoveFilm Instant.

Guido Crepax created eighteen *Valentina* albums, most of which have not been translated into English. *Valentina and the Magic Lantern*, first published in 1977, was republished in the UK in 2012 by Headline, and features no dialogue.

All images taken from the version of the film available on LoveFilm Instant.