

# Film

## COMMENT

November-December 1987

### A Queer Kind of Film

All too often, the filmmakers' self-consciousness took the form of film or video-within-film. When used gratuitously, the device was an irritating example of the kind of tunnel vision plaguing today's commercial film school babies, whose world seems entirely mediated by movies or television.

In Su Friedrich's intricate *Damned If You Don't*, however, the film-within-the-film becomes inextricable from the narrative surrounding it: one cleverly illuminates the other. Friedrich's erotic tale of moral inertia plays off the 1946 film *Black Narcissus* and the story of a 17th century nun jailed for lesbianism with a contemporary story of a Catholic women and a nun who are drawn to one another. For the devout filmgoer, Friedrich's greatest irreverence is the spectacle of seeing *Black Narcissus* in black and white, but even this audacity is thematically à propos. Stripping the Powell/Pressburger film of its peacock-colored allure results in a punning comment on the punitive, black-and-white ethos of the Catholic order. It also underscores Friedrich's reductive, allegorical synopsis of *Black Narcissus*, in which the individual must choose the route of "good nun" Deborah Kerr or "bad nun" Jean Simmons. Forty-one years post-*Black* (and white) *Narcissus*, the spirit of Jean Simmons prevails: audiences heave a major sigh of relief—and perhaps a sensual shudder—as Friedrich's nun joins her elusive object of desire in lusty embrace.

Friedrich's achievement in combining social criticism and eroticism contrasted with most of the other films, which either managed to avoid both or eschew one in favor of the other.

—JAN STUART