

## Luis Buñuel

b. February 22, 1900, Calanda, Spain  
 d. July 29, 1983, Mexico City, Mexico

by **Dominique Russell**



Dominique Russell teaches in the Spanish, Film and Comparative Literature programs at the University of Western Ontario (London, Canada).

[Filmography](#)   [Select Bibliography](#)   [Articles in Senses](#)   [Web Resources](#)

Luis Buñuel was a singular figure in world cinema, and a consecrated auteur from the start. Born almost with cinema itself, his work moves from surrealist experimentation in the 1920s, through commercial comedies and melodrama in the 1950s, to postmodernist *cine d'art* in the 1960s and '70s. Claimed for France, where he made his celebrated early and late films, for Spain, where he was born and had his deepest cultural roots, and for Mexico, where he became a citizen and made 20 films, he has more recently been seen as a figure in permanent exile who problematises the very idea of the national in his films.

A surrealist, an iconoclast, a contrarian and provocateur, Buñuel claimed that his project was to pierce the self-assurance of the powerful. His work takes shape beneath the "double arches of beauty and rebellion", as Octavio Paz put it (1). Recently, his sons have reasserted Buñuel's view of *Un Chien andalou*, as "a call to murder" against the "museum-ifying" of the celebrations of his centenary. While this exaggerates somewhat his radicalism and outsider status, there is considerable consistency in his attacks on the bourgeoisie, whose hypocrisy and dissembling both amused and enraged him. "In a world as badly made as ours," he said, "there is only one road – rebellion." (2)

Buñuel is in fact satirising his own class, to which he comfortably and unabashedly belonged. He understood the neuroses and pettiness of his middle class Catholic upbringing well. "I am still an atheist, thank God", he famously said. It is one of his many paradoxes: he was both inside and outside. While a ferocious critic of the ideologies of the powerful in his films (the unholy trinity of bourgeois complacency, religious hypocrisy, and patriarchal authority), he enjoyed the fruits of this social order in his personal life. His wife's memoirs *Mujer sin piano* (*Woman without a Piano*), written to fill out Buñuel's own, in which she and her children are mentioned hardly at all, reads like the remembrances of a Stockholm-syndrome afflicted captive. Jeanne Rucar, who met Buñuel in 1926 and married him in 1934, tries to tell a love story but the pain and losses he inflicted on her, including that of her beloved piano, to a bet made by Luis without her consent, constantly shine through.

Without going as far as Paulo Antonio Paranaguá, who asserts that the “he” of the title is Buñuel himself, (3) it is safe to say the director of *EI* (1953), adapted from a novel by Mercedes Pinto, knew the material intimately. Part of his genius was this ability to stand outside his cultural self, dissecting desire and the torturous routes of its suppression in bourgeois, patriarchal Catholic societies. His films focus on male desire, and his female protagonists are often mere projections of it. But the characterisations of Viridiana, Tristana, and Séverine in *Belle de jour* most notably, also reveal the way in which bourgeois society distorts and represses these women's basic needs and desires “conspir[ing] to keep them in a position of subservience and servitude.” (4)

*EI*

The bourgeoisie interested him particularly because its good manners demand the repression of desire. His readings of Freud inspired him to study his class as a laboratory for the twisted return of the repressed. But it was the social and economic power of the bourgeoisie that made him want to implode it from within. If Henry Miller was right when he stated that “Buñuel, like an entomologist, has studied what we call love in order to expose beneath the ideology, mythology, platitudes and phraseologies the complete and bloody machinery of sex,” (5) Luis was also, like an entomologist, interested in the relationships of power in sex, politics and everyday life; not just the mating dance, but the dance of homosocial power disguised beneath it, and all the other forms of power that can be exercised as violence and more subtle forms of repression.

Miller's reference to the study of insects is apt; Buñuel did in fact consider becoming an entomologist. It also situates his directorial perspective. His sometimes unlikeable characters are engaged at a distance that wavers between pathos and bathos. We see their humanity, but he “blocks the pleasure of psychological identification [...] by disturbing the aesthetic framework that solicits and guarantees it.” (6) Buñuel's stylish witticisms, or rather, witticisms of style, establish a relationship with the viewer over the heads of his characters. This relationship is free of concessions; there's no effort at being liked or even understood. Commenting on *The Exterminating Angel*, Joan Mellen shows how he parodies the tracking shot by not allowing sufficient space to complete it. “Such overt intrusions of style”, she notes, “announce the real hero of Buñuel's films, his the only consciousness we can respect” (7).

Yet this supremely individualistic, uncompromising director was always supported and surrounded by other talents that let his own flourish. Buñuel always wrote in collaboration: initially mostly with Luis Alcoriza, then Julio Alejandro, and finally Jean-Claude Carrière. This aspect of the “Buñuel apparatus” has been underexplored; perhaps these other writers were in fact just the midwives to Buñuel's talents, and it is hard to quantify their contribution.

More than other directors, Buñuel has etched indelible images into film culture. The “Buñuelian” can refer to shots of insects, a sheep or other farm animal appearing in posh settings, cutaways to animals eating one another, bizarre hands, odd physical types and, especially, fetishistic shots of feet and legs (said Hitchcock of *Tristana*: “That leg! That leg!”) (8). The term also implies the confusions of dream and reality, form and anti-form, an irreverent sense of humour, black, morbid jokes that hint at

the constant presence of the irrational, the absurdity of human actions. Buñuel shares this sensibility with the Spanish *esperpento*, the distancing black comedy that has been considered an authentic Spanish film tradition.

He also shares with the *esperpento* an acid view of the powerful and their excesses, as well as a sense of sexuality as debasing and enslaving. Desires, sexual and political, are continually intertwined in his films. More than a call to murder, his best films are a call to an attempt at anarchist freedom, however futile, both in love and society.

## The early trilogy

Buñuel was born in Calanda in 1900. He would immortalise his hometown's Easter Week drumming through repetition that would make it almost a "biofilmographic signature". (9) The first born of a rich-landowning family, he studied with the Jesuits in Zaragoza, where his father owned a stately home, and spent his summers in Calanda. At 17 he moved to Madrid where he lived at the prestigious Residencia de estudiantes until 1925. This extraordinary pedagogical and social experiment was driven by Giner de los Ríos' ideal of bringing together the best of Spanish and European creative thinkers, artists and scientists, into a kind of cultural cauldron. Buñuel made the most of these conditions, reading poetry, writing, performing in plays, boxing, dressing up as a nun, knocking over blind people and founding the "Order of Toledo", admission to which required adoring the city, aimlessly wandering its streets and drinking all night. There he met and became friends with Federico García Lorca and Salvador Dalí. Though they ended unhappily, these friendships would profoundly mark Buñuel's life and work.

After his father died in 1925, Buñuel headed to Paris, another, more cosmopolitan, artistic forge. He knew and loved the silent comics, Harold Lloyd and Buster Keaton especially, from his time at the Residencia, but it wasn't until he came to Paris that he focused his creative energies on directing films. In 1926 he met Jean Epstein and became his assistant. It was his mother, however, who provided the funds for his first film, *Un Chien andalou* in 1929. This short is said to be the most analysed 17 minutes of film ever. A surreal, violently disjunctive story of desire, gender confusion and the unconscious, it still retains its power to shock. Dalí and Buñuel wrote the film together, based on their dreams, in what Buñuel describes as perfect symbiosis:



*Un Chien andalou*

*We wrote the script in less than a week, following a very simple idea, adopted by common agreement: not to accept any idea or image that might give rise to a rational, psychological or cultural explanation.* (10)

The bond between them would soon break down however, and the contribution of each to *L'Age d'or* (1930) is still contested today. *Un Chien andalou* was Buñuel and Dalí's entry card into the Paris Surrealist group. Buñuel expected an adverse reaction to the film, and allegedly came to the first screening with rocks in his pockets to "respond to the audience". It was well received, however, by Surrealists and bourgeois alike, and Buñuel was determined that his next film would not have its

sting be subverted by praise. *L'Age d'or*, funded by the Vicomte de Noailles, turned out to be more of a *film maudit* than he bargained for. As Buñuel describes it

*The extreme right attacked the movie theatre, tore up the paintings in the surrealist exhibit that had been set up in the foyer, threw bombs at the screen, and destroyed seats. It was the "scandal" of L'Age d'or. A week later, Chiappe, civil governor, purely and simply banned the film in the name of public order.*  
(11)

He would later have his revenge on Chiappe, who was in fact the police prefect, using his name in *Diary of a Chambermaid* to represent reactionary forces. At the time, Buñuel, and the film, were accused of everything detestable: "Judeo-Bolshevik devil-worshipping Masonic wogs did this" went the moral panic (12). While Buñuel and the Noailles were distressed at the reaction, the Surrealists made the most of the scandal, publishing a tract that included a provocative questionnaire by Louis Aragon and Paul Eluard alongside photos of the wrecked cinema.



*L'Age d'or*

In many ways an expansion of its predecessor, *L'Age d'or* is a story of *l'amour fou* and its social and psychic impediments. Beginning with a prologue of found footage on scorpions, the film is a collage of six segments, loosely following the impossible love of a man (Gaston Modot) and woman (Lya Lys). They begin their love rolling ecstatically in the mud as Rome is founded. Thereafter social forces intervene and they are left frustrated, with sly winks to masturbation occurring throughout. When they finally do get together, they can't seem to get into position, in a brilliant bit of physical comedy

that pays homage to the silents Buñuel admired. Paul Hammond calls the epilogue "a sixth vesicular joint, the poison sac", and remarks that the provocation of having Jesus stand-in as the Duke of Blangis from Sade's *120 Days of Sodom* seemed an archaic blasphemy in the '80s, when the film became easily obtainable. "Now that religious fundamentalism has returned to plague the world it resonates again." (13)

Where *Un Chien andalou* plays with vision through eye-line mismatches and an emphasis on looking and exchanges of glances, *L'Age d'or* is concerned with the ear. In some sense, *Un Chien* is about editing – the splice "in a blink of the eye", while *L'Age d'or* explores the filmic possibilities of sound. If the first invents the "tragic gag", as Jean Cocteau would have it, the second initiates the "sound gag" that Buñuel would develop throughout his career. In fact, he would spend the next few years, after a brief stint in Hollywood, between Paris and Madrid, supervising dubbing at Paramount and Warner Brothers. As Marsha Kinder notes, he was "mastering the conventions of film sound, to subvert them more effectively." (14)

His next film, *Las Hurdes* (1932), a 27-minute documentary, was the result of chance. Ramón Acín, a Spanish anarchist and friend, told Buñuel that if he won the lottery he would finance his next film. Luck struck both of them, and Buñuel assembled a crew to film a "surrealist documentary" in the remote region of Las Hurdes, which before and after was used as a watermark for progress.

What resulted is a documentary that posits the impossibility of the documentary, placing the viewer in the uneasy situation of complicity with a cruel camera probing the miseries of the *urdanos* for our benefit. These miseries are piled on in what Ado

Kyrou termed a “yes but” structure that is desolate and grotesque (“When a viper bites them, the bite itself is rarely fatal, but in trying to cure it with herbs, they infect the wound and die.”) (15) Written with the French surrealist poet Pierre Unik, the commentary – in the 1937 English version, using the tone of American newsreels – is often subtly at odds with what we are shown. The tension between image and sound is brilliantly exploited to undermine the very authority posited by the documentary genre. Buñuel dismantles the propagandist method of authoritarian telling as truth-making. As Mercé Ibraz puts it, Buñuel opted for “radicalism in sound” (16).

She also describes the sequence of the death of the goat as the leitmotif of the film's strategy of communication:

*The story highlights the impossible living conditions in Las Hurdes. Even goats throw themselves off mountaintops. The camera follows a goat that [as revealed in the cut footage] was savagely pursued by the crew. Buñuel ended up shooting the goat himself, which falls from a position where we can see the smoke from his revolver in the middle-right hand of the screen – a decision that reflects Buñuel's radical style in mise en scène composition. (17)*

This killing of the goat also implies that the crew is adding to the indigence of the *urdanos*, whatever the notoriety of the film might have done for them down the line. In an article for *Vu* in 1935, Unik reports an old woman saying the crew should be gotten out at gunpoint.

*Las Hurdes* was banned by three successive Republican governments, and definitively by Franco. In 1936 Buñuel allowed a pro-Republican epilogue to be added, the surrealist documentary thus becoming Republican propaganda. If it did serve the Republican cause, however, it was outside of Spain. The film remained banned and retained much of its discomfiting power despite the alterations.

## Interlude (1934–1946)

Buñuel had broken with the surrealist group in May 1932, dismayed at the intrusion of politics and snobbery. He had never been, as Hammond notes, one of the “pacemakers of the group”, though Surrealism was “tantamount to a religious conversion” for him. (18) One of his biographers, John Baxter, comments that in the increasing polarisation of the 1930s, Buñuel “stayed on the fence. Intellectually, he supported the left, but his family and education, not to mention the growing excesses of the Republic, inclined him to the moderates.” (19)

Between 1934 and 1936, Buñuel worked at Filmófono, Spain's Republican experiment in commercial filmmaking, making films as “executive director” (or producer, depending on the source) that he later wanted to forget. He participated in four films, including *La hija de Juan Simón* (*Juan Simon's Daughter*) (1935) and *¿Quién me quiere a mí?* (*Who Loves Me?*) (1936), with José Luis Sáenz de Heredia, later famous for directing *Raza* (*Race*) (1941), Franco's fictionalised autobiography. It was the first volley in an experiment to “make popular commercial cinema, but with cultural dignity” that would continue in Mexico (20). The Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), however, cut short Filmófono's production, and rent the fabric of Spain's “Silver Age” in half.

The end of the war caught Buñuel in Hollywood, where he became a reluctant exile. This was a much more painful exile than his time as a “*mètèque*” –as foreigners were disparagingly called–in Paris. The Republican loss made a return impossible.

Though in 1939 he planned to “stay indefinitely, intensely attracted by the American naturalness and sociability,” (21) he could not make a place for himself in the American film industry. Remembering this time, Buñuel commented wryly:

*I could not work in the movies because I had bad grades from Hollywood. My previous experience, as you will remember, was not recommendable. (22)*

## Mexico (1946–1964)

In 1946, Buñuel was invited to adapt Lorca's *La casa de Bernarda Alba* to be filmed in Mexico. The project never materialised, but Buñuel found other opportunities in Mexico, and decided to move his family there. While exile in Mexico was still difficult, Buñuel was surrounded by a language and a culture closer to his own, as well as a community of Spanish émigrés. His entry into Mexican cinema was not easy: his first effort *Gran Casino* (1946) was a flop. Buñuel considered his next film *El gran calavera* (1949) equally banal, but it helped him establish a craftsman's discipline and technique. As Baxter describes it:

*Each of his films had about 125 shots, which he planned in details beforehand at home, complete with measurements and durations [...] He seldom needed more than two takes of a shot, and never covered himself with additional shooting. He never looked at rushes. Pierre Lary, his assistant on his last films, nervously called it 'working without a net' but admitted that it worked. (23)*



**Los olvidados**

*Los olvidados* (1950), produced by Oscar Dancingers, his most consistent backer in this period, was the beginning of his return to the international stage, and a turning point in Mexican cinema. Buñuel won the Best Director prize at the Cannes Film Festival, though he was attacked by critics for turning Mexico's sacred national myths inside out – precisely what would later make the film so important to the national cinema. It follows the story of Ojitos [“Little Eyes”] abandoned to the streets of Mexico City, and the other homeless boys he takes

up with. In his characterisation of the blind beggar who exploits Ojitos, Buñuel continues to explore how the disenfranchised fight for whatever scraps of power left to them. Its brutal lack of sentimentality and flashes of black humour mark its influence by the Spanish picaresque; and its famous dream sequence, in which one of the boy's mother offers her son raw meat, shows how Buñuel, a surrealist to the end, continued to find creative fodder in the oneiric. *Los olvidados* is one of Buñuel's great films, and one of Mexico's as well. Though its formal antecedent is *Las Hurdes*, it anticipates the New Latin American cinema's turn away from the studio sets towards reality in the streets.

Buñuel continued to work in Mexico until 1964, making 20 films that vary in quality and interest. Though critics have combed them all for every possible Buñuelian – or surrealist – moment, it seems more reasonable to approach films like *A Loveless Woman* (1951), *Illusion Travels by Streetcar* (1953), *River of Death* (1954), or his adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* (1954), as Mexican films that respond (more or less creatively) to the generic conventions of the studio system. Seen as “Buñuelia”, they might be disappointing, but they are well crafted, populist films that, as

Acevedo-Muñoz comments, might “upset our image of Buñuel as the European surrealist phenomenon who was always ill-at-ease within a national film industry.” (24) While he often pushed at the conventions, he also worked within them. Indeed, these Mexican films can be seen as an extension of Buñuel's exploration of commercial filmmaking at Filmófono.

The best of the Mexican studio films, (or perhaps more exactly, the films made for a Mexican audience) are the ones in which Buñuel's personality, interests and wit have freer reign within the constraints of narrative convention. The previously mentioned *El* portrays the paranoia of Francisco, a madly jealous upper class Mexican. An almost clinical psychological study, it questions the power dynamics between the long-suffering wife, threatened at one point with having her vagina sewn shut (the first Mexican audience laughed at the huge cord proposed for the deed) and the husband, unhinged by sexual desire – whether for his wife or his butler remains somewhat ambiguous. It's also a black joke, in which the paranoid lover driven mad might just have been right all along. Buñuel said of the film:

*I was moved by this man with so much jealousy, so much internal loneliness and anxiety and so much external violence. I studied him like an insect.* (25)

Archibaldo Cruz, the protagonist of *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo Cruz* (1955), is also an upper class effete enslaved by desire. A would-be-murderer of women, his crimes never quite come off, since his intended victims die before he has a chance to kill them. Unlike Francisco, Archibaldo is cured, and the film ends with him walking straight, and saving the life of an insect. Another *scerzo*, as Buñuel would have it, it light-heartedly turns the power of the rich macho inside out.

Buñuel, despite his relative freedom and success within the system, found it constraining and looked for opportunities outside Mexico. *Los olvidados'* acclaim opened the door for international projects. He made five co-productions in all during the Mexican period: two with US producers, *Robinson Crusoe* (1952); *The Young One* (1960); and three with French producers, *Cela s'appelle l'aurore* (1955); *La Mort en ce jardin* (1956); *La Fièvre monte à El Pao* (1959), all of which are hard to find and generally not considered Buñuel's best. They address, rather indirectly, Buñuel's exile. The English language films, both set on islands, bring together two men, one powerful, one not, in an isolated setting.

*The Young One*, though slow-paced and rather stilted, is nevertheless interesting in the way it frames racism and sexism as parallel discourses. It is based on a short story by Peter Mathieson about a black man accused of rape. He takes refuge on an island, only to find himself caught by the racist gamekeeper who considers the island his domain. The title refers to the girl, not insignificantly named Evie, who is claimed by the gamekeeper as his property, but the essential relationship is between the men. In a technique he would repeat in *Viridiana* (1961), the camera implicates the viewer in the sexualisation of the child, with shots erotically framing her legs and feet. *The Young One*, unlike *Robinson Crusoe*, didn't do well at the box office. Buñuel commented in *My Last Sigh*: “one of the problems [with it] was its anti-Manichean stance, which was an anomaly at the time, although today it's all the rage.” (26) Nevertheless his tone suggests that he is



*The Young One*

quite proud of these American productions, as if to say he could have been a Hollywood filmmaker like other European exiles, had chance not sent him to Latin America.

Buñuel, like many critics, seemed to consider Mexico as a long parenthesis between European films that form an otherwise stylistically and thematically interconnected body of work. This undervalues his adaptability, as well as his connection to Mexican cinema. By the time he made his last, and best, Mexican films, the studio system was in collapse, and Buñuel's progressive independence had spurred a younger generation of Mexican directors to find ways to make more personally inflected and critical films.

## Religion



**Nazarín**

Catholic Film Office.

*Nazarín* (1958) is one of Buñuel's quartet of adaptations of the great 19th century Spanish writer Benito Pérez Galdós, and, with *Simon of the Desert* (1965), though unfinished, forms the best of his explorations of religion. *La Voie lactée* (1969), a kind of free-flowing essay on Catholic heresy, is more biting in many ways, but lacks the dramatic force and magnetic ambivalence of these earlier works. He was both embarrassed and pleased, it seems, when *La Voie lactée*, and belatedly *Nazarín*, were accepted by the Church, the latter receiving a prize from the US National

Ed Gonzales recently characterised Buñuel as a "spiritual fetishist" (27) and certainly, though he asserted his atheism, he shows a fascination for the questions and paraphernalia of religious devotion similar to Unamuno's agonised belief. Likewise, Baxter points out an affinity between Graham Greene and Buñuel's Mexican-French co-productions of the '50s. "Both were remote, ascetic, misanthropic, Catholic/atheist," he comments, adding, "the films are scattered with quasi-devotional fetish objects that Greene might have relished." (28)

The eventual acceptance of *La Voie lactée* and *Nazarín*, however, didn't quite remove the "whiff of sulphur" created by *Viridiana* (29). Meant to signal Buñuel's return and reconciliation to the Francoist homeland, it was depicted by Mexican cartoonist Alberto Isaacs as a gift-wrapped bomb going off in Franco's hands. The story of a novice who returns to visit her protector uncle one last time before taking her vows turned out to be just that. Buñuel was given a great deal of freedom with the script and rushed the film to Cannes before the final version was seen by officials. When the film was screened, its combination of necrophilia, rape, suicide and mockery of Christian charity proved too much. It was, however, the blasphemous re-creation of Leonardo Da Vinci's *Last Supper* in the beggars' banquet that made it a scandal. But Buñuel knew the value of scandal from *L'Age d'or*: *Viridiana* made him once again the centre of attention of the film world and opened the door for his return to European filmmaking.

## The Late Films (1963–1977)

*Viridiana* can be seen as a creative apex, as though the exile's return to his native land rejuvenated his talents. In fact, it heralded a period of creative plenty. It also



placed Buñuel on a more secure footing, attracting Serge Silverman in 1963 as his new, more solvent and reliable producer. Despite his prestige, Buñuel's independence had its price. *Nazarín*, for example, was cut short when Gustavo Alastriste, the producer of Buñuel's last Mexican films, ran out of money, and Buñuel complained about the less than stellar sets for his masterpiece *The Exterminating Angel* (1962). A "parable of bourgeois paralysis," (30) it forms a neat pair with his Oscar-winning *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* ten years later, as if Buñuel felt the need for a more luxurious European version.

*The Exterminating Angel* is full of surrealist disjunctions and insouciance; famously, the beginning is repeated exactly, one of a number of repetitions throughout the film, and sheep crowd into a church as the ending starts the story all over again. As Baxter points out, the theme of a group of bourgeois paralysed by inertia is a common one in Latin American literature, so that while the film doesn't engage Mexican realities, it nevertheless treats a Latin American theme. Indeed, though it seemed that Buñuel would leave these behind with his next two films *Diary of a Chambermaid* and *Belle de Jour*, in his last trilogy there is a gathering together of themes, national symbols and experiences.

*Diary of a Chambermaid* (1964), an adaptation of Octave Mirbeau's novel of the same name, was initially planned for a Mexican shoot with Silvia Pinal, who had starred in *Viridiana* and *Simon of the Desert*. With the change in producer, however, the Mexican star was no longer appropriate. Silberman introduced Buñuel to Jeanne Moreau, who was cast mostly on the basis of the way she walked and ate. She proved to be one of his favourite actresses, though it was their only collaboration.



*Diary of a Chambermaid*

Equally idiosyncratic, it seems, was his choice of his new co-screenwriter, Jean-Claude Carrière, from a number of candidates proposed by Silberman. Carrière realised that Buñuel's query as to whether he drank wine was less innocuous than it seemed. He said he did and they went on to write ten screenplays together over many bottles of wine. Carrière brought a French sensibility to Buñuel's films, which seemed to unlock a greater freedom in the treatment of sexual perversion, always one of Buñuel's favourite topics. *Diary* has Moreau as Célestine, the servant of provincial bourgeois family who is desired by Monteil *père* and *fils* (Michel Piccoli), the first with a foot fetish, the second with a sexually repressed wife. Rejected by Célestine, the son tries to seduce an older, unattractive servant (Muni) in what Buñuel describes as a profanation of *l'amour fou*. "It's vivifying to blaspheme what one believes in," he notes (31).

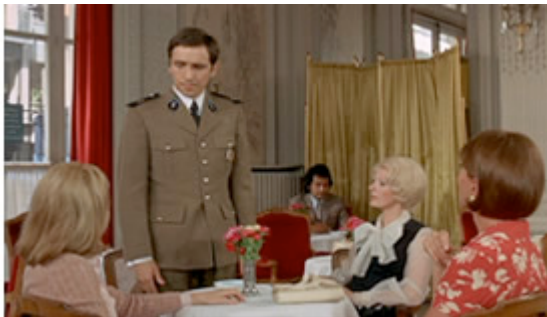
An atmosphere of sexual decadence also pervades *Belle de jour* (1967), Buñuel's adaptation of the Joseph Kessel novel, produced by the rather disreputable Hakim brothers. Sévérine (Catherine Deneuve) is a bored housewife with an asexual marriage who takes up prostitution a few hours in the afternoon (hence her moniker) to awaken her sexual self. Buñuel spent more time than usual in post-production, carefully working the soundtrack to blur the lines between Sévérine's masochistic dream life and her reality. As in *L'Age d'or*, bells are a key sound effect, ringing in the heroines' suppressed desires.

At this point in his life, Buñuel was very nearly deaf, but his understanding of the possibilities of sound remained intact. The technique of using noise – never music, which Buñuel avoided – to first establish a plane of reality and then confuse it would be further developed in *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972) where dreams fit into one another like china boxes and sound gags are layered into the (non)narrative.

With *Tristana* (1970) Buñuel would return to Spain. It was a project he had long wanted to do, but Franco's officials always found an obstacle to prevent him filming it as he wanted. This adaptation of Galdós is a sort of bookend to *Viridiana*. *Tristana* is raised by her uncle, who takes her as his mistress when she becomes an adolescent. Though she detests him, she eventually becomes his wife. Where *Viridiana* was quietly rebellious and eventually submissive, *Tristana* progresses from submission to poisonous rebellion. In this later period Buñuel would allow his female protagonists to reverse the patriarchal power structure, eventually dominating their diminished men.

*Tristana* stars Fernando Rey, Buñuel's faithful alter ego. He preferred to work with the same actors and crew, especially in his later years, when Rey, Piccoli, Muni, Pierre Clementi, Claudio Brook, George Marchal and Carrière formed what amounted to a stock company. *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977), his last film, would take advantage of this recognisability, casting Rey as Mathieu, with Piccoli's voice. This sound-image mismatch suggests the sort of French/Spanish amalgam that the public Buñuel had become.

His last trilogy – *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, *The Phantom of Liberty* (1974), *That Obscure Object of Desire* – a kind of gathering up of creative threads, plays with the myths of the national, using stereotype to show up their absurdity. Addressed to a French audience, they discreetly insert Franco-Spanish relations into their rich tapestry. *Phantom*, for example, begins with a recreation of Napoleon's invasion of Spain, with images from Goya's painting of the second of May. *That Obscure Object* has the French-voiced Spaniard in thrall to Conchita, a woman who appears in two different forms, one a dark-haired firebrand played by Angela Molina, the other a cool French beauty played by Carole Bouquet.



***The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie***

In *Discreet Charm* Rey plays Rafael Acosta, ambassador to the Latin American republic of Miranda, who gets on famously with his French bourgeois cohorts until they turn on him with smug clichés about his homeland. None can distinguish his country from any other Latin American ones, inquiring about the pyramids and other landmarks from elsewhere. Their eurocentrism is further underlined as the colonel hosting one of their impossible dinner parties comments that he's heard that in Miranda "on tue pour un oui ou un non" ("they kill for a yes or a no"). When Acosta responds with a very French insult, the colonel slaps him. Acosta then shoots him in retaliation, confirming the cliché. Thus, as Marie-Claude Taranger notes, through Buñuelian paradox national myths are satirised, asserted and finally undermined (32).

Less narrative than anti-narrative, these films play with chance, happenstance, dreams and repetitions. Still under the "double arches of beauty and rebellion,"

Buñuel's late films have a lighter touch. The bourgeoisie is attacked, but the tone is more of amusement than outrage.

Still there is darkness in the jokes. The silent walking of the bourgeois friends of *Discreet Charm* is an unnerving interruption: almost, perhaps, an entomological insert. Both it and *The Phantom of Liberty* end with executions, and *That Obscure Object of Desire* with an explosion: political violence closing off what might be a happy ending.

The love story that precedes it, however, is a cat and mouse exercise in frustration and humiliation in which the power balance is continually shifting. What Mathieu narrates to a group of polite bourgeois, including a dwarf who is a Freudian analyst, might just be a cover for a less romantic story of rape, if we consider the clues at the film's opening. Mathieu's valet comes upon a bloodied pillow, a pair of shoes, and a pair of wet panties in a disordered room where glasses and vases have been broken. The valet picks up each item, as if it were the clue to a mystery. "Elle a saigné" ("she bled"), he says regarding the pillow. "Elle a eu peur" ("she was afraid") he says regarding the panties. It is curious that Mathieu responds to only one of these comments, significantly the blood, which he underlines as having come from her nose. The emphasis on the origin of the blood links it through denial to both sexual violence and a loss of virginity. "Ce n'est rien" ("it's nothing") says Mathieu, setting off a chain of disavowals throughout the film. And so, once again, beneath the platitudes of love, sex, and beneath that, power.

The political and the sexual are not so far apart for Buñuel, as arenas for power and repression. As in *Discreet Charm*, the "bad manners" of politics – gunshots and explosions – finally invade the soundtrack and the screen, displacing all other desire. The explosion cuts off an impossible narrative that can have no end. Yet given how fond Buñuel was of literalising turns of phrases, he might just have wanted to go out with a bang.

In any case, it was a fittingly enigmatic last frame for the masterpiece that would close Buñuel's career. That career's arc is so wide, his films so varied in location, means and audiences that Buñuel in himself constitutes an introduction to film history. His masterpieces are essential viewing, but even his lesser works are worth a look.

Though Silberman tried to coax another film out of him, Buñuel spent the last years of his life being old, as he jokes in *My Last Sigh*. In 1983, he died, his wife at his side. Paradoxical to the end, he chose Mexico as his resting place, having spent his last few months in the company of a Catholic priest.

---

© Dominique Russell, March 2005

---

### Endnotes

1. Quoted in *Luis Buñuel: el ojo de la libertad*, Publicaciones de la Residencia de Estudiantes, Madrid, 2000, p. 20. ▲
2. Quoted in Joan Mellen, "An Overview of Buñuel's Career" in Mellen (ed.), *The World of Luis Buñuel: Essays in Criticism*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1978, p. 20. ▲

22. Paulo Antonio Paranaguá, *El: Luis Buñuel*, Ediciones Paidós, Barcelona, 2001, p. 124. ▲
23. Mellen, p. 14. ▲
24. Henry Miller, "The Golden Age" in Mellen, pp. 174–75. ▲
25. Paul Sandro, *Diversions of Pleasure: Luis Buñuel and the Crises of Desire*, Ohio State University Press, Columbus, 1987, p. 21–22. ▲
26. Mellen, p. 23. ▲
27. See <http://cvc.cervantes.es/actcult/bunuel/obsesiones/> ▲
28. Marvin D'Lugo, "Buñuel in the Cathedral of Culture" in Marsha Kinder (ed.), *Luis Buñuel's The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York, 1999, p. 108. ▲
29. Quoted in Instituto Cervantes, *Buñuel, 100 años: es peligroso asomarse al Interior/ Buñuel, 100 Years: It's Dangerous to Look Inside*, Instituto Cervantes; Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2001, p. 62. ▲
30. Instituto Cervantes, p.69. ▲
31. Paul Hammond, *L'Age d'or*, British Film Institute, London, 1997, p. 61. ▲
32. Hammond, p. 53. ▲
33. Marsha Kinder, *Blood Cinema the Reconstruction of National Identity in Spain*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1993, p. 294. ▲
34. Adonis Kyrou, *Luis Buñuel: An Introduction*, Trans. Adrienne Foulke Simon and Schuster, New York, 1963, p. 44. ▲
35. Mercè Ibarz, "A Serious Experiment: *Land Without Bread*, 1933" in Peter William Evans and Isabel Santaolalla (eds), *Luis Buñuel: New Readings*, BFI, London, 2004, p. 37. ▲
36. Ibarz, p. 30. ▲
37. Hammond, p. 20. ▲
38. John Baxter, *Buñuel*, Carroll & Graf, New York, 1998, p. 147. ▲
39. Víctor Fuentes, "The Constant Exile in Buñuel." in Evans and Santaolalla, p. 162. ▲
40. Luis Buñuel, *An Unspeakable Betrayal: Selected Writings of Luis Buñuel*,

- University of California Press, Berkeley, 2000, p. 255. ▲
22. Luis Buñuel, José de la Colina, Tomás Pérez Turrent. *Objects of Desire: Conversations with Luis Buñuel*, Trans. Paul Lenti, Marsilio, New York, 1992, p. 160. ▲
23. Baxter, p. 206. ▲
24. Ernesto R. Acevedo-Muñoz, *Buñuel and Mexico: The Crisis of National Cinema*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2003, p. 11. ▲
25. Quoted in Paranagúa, p. 134. ▲
26. Luis Buñuel, *My Last Sigh*, Trans. A. Israel, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1983, p. 192. ▲
27. Ed Gonzales, "The Savage Poetry of Luis Buñuel", *Slant* online magazine. Accessed 4 April, 2005. ▲
28. Baxter, p. 244. ▲
29. Baxter, p. 262. ▲
30. Mellen, p. 11. ▲
31. Buñuel, Colina, Turrent, p. 159. ▲
32. My analysis is indebted to Marie-Claude Taranger's "Le dialogue interculturel chez Buñuel: les films français et l'hispanité" in Gastón Lillo (ed.), *Buñuel: el imaginario transcultural/L'imaginaire transculturel/The Transcultural Imaginary*, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, 2003, pp. 11–20. ▲

## Filmography

*Un Chien andalou (An Andalusian Dog)*  
(1929) France

*L'Age d'or (The Golden Age)* (1930)  
France

*Las Hurdes (Land Without Bread)* (1932)  
Spain

*Gran Casino* (1946) Mexico

*El gran calavera (The Great Carouser)*  
(1949) Mexico



**Luis Buñuel**

*Los olvidados (The Young and the Damned)* (1950) Mexico  
*The Devil and the Flesh (Susana/Demonio y carne)* (1950) Mexico  
*The Daughter of Deceit (La hija del engaño/Don Quintín el amargao)* (1951) Mexico  
*A Loveless Woman (Una mujer sin amor)* (1951) Mexico  
*Stairway to Heaven (Subida al cielo)* (1951) Mexico  
*The Brute (El bruto)* (1952) Mexico  
*Robinson Crusoe* (1952) US  
*El (This Strange Passion)* (1953) Mexico  
*Illusion Travels by Streetcar (La ilusión viaja en tranvía)* (1953) Mexico  
*Wuthering Heights (Abismos de pasión)* (1954) Mexico  
*River of Death (El río y la muerte)* (1954) Mexico  
*The Criminal Life of Archibaldo Cruz (Ensayo de un crimen)* (1955) Mexico  
*Cela s'appelle l'aurore* (1955) France–Italy  
*La Mort en ce jardin* (1956) France–Mexico  
*Nazarín* (1958) Mexico  
*La Fièvre monte à El Pao* (1959) France–Mexico  
*The Young One (La Joven)* (1960) US–Mexico  
*Viridiana* (1961) Spain–Mexico  
*The Exterminating Angel (El ángel exterminador)* (1962) Mexico  
*Diary of a Chambermaid (Le Journal d'une femme de chambre)* (1963) France–Italy  
*Simon of the Desert (Simón del desierto)* (1965) Mexico  
*Belle de jour* (1967) France–Italy  
*La Voie lactée (The Milky Way)* (1969) France–Italy  
*Tristana* (1970) Spain–France–Italy  
*The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie (Le Charme discret de la bourgeoisie)* (1972) France–Spain–Italy  
*The Phantom of Liberty (Le Fantôme de la liberté)* (1974) France  
*That Obscure Object of Desire (Cet obscur objet du désir)* (1977) France–Spain

For a complete list of other credits, including producer, screenwriter, actor and

editor (re-cutting) see *Buñuel 100 Years*, which includes a list of documentaries made about the director.



### Select Bibliography

Ernesto R. Acevedo-Muñoz, *Buñuel and Mexico: The Crisis of National Cinema*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2003.

John Baxter, *Buñuel*, Carroll & Graf, New York, 1998.

Freddy Buache, *The Cinema of Luis Buñuel*, Trans. P. Graham, Tantivy Press, London; A. S. Barnes, New York, 1973.

Luis Buñuel, *My Last Sigh*, Trans. A. Israel, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1983.

Luis Buñuel, *An Unspeakable Betrayal: Selected Writings of Luis Buñuel*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2000.

Luis Buñuel, José de la Colina, Tomás Pérez Turrent. *Objects of Desire: Conversations with Luis Buñuel*, Trans. Paul Lenti, Marsilio, New York, 1992.

Antonio Castro (ed.), *Obsesión es Buñuel*, Ocho y Medio; Asociación Luis Buñuel, Madrid, 2001.

José de la Colina and Tomás Pérez Turrent (eds), *Luis Buñuel, Prohibido Asomarse al Interior*, J. Mortiz; Planeta, México, 1986.

Raymond Durnat, *Luis Buñuel*, Movie Magazine, London, 1967.

Peter William Evans, *The Films of Luis Buñuel: Subjectivity and Desire*, Clarendon Press, Oxford; Oxford University Press, New York, 1995.

Peter William Evans and Isabel Santaolalla (eds), *Luis Buñuel: New Readings*, BFI, London, 2004.

Víctor Fuentes, *Buñuel en México: iluminaciones sobre una pantalla pobre*, Instituto de Estudios Turolenses, Excma. Diputación Provincial de Teruel, Teruel, 1993.

Paul Hammond, *L'Age d'or*, British Film Institute, London, 1997.

Mercè Ibarz, *Buñuel documental: "Tierra sin pan" y su tiempo*, Prensas Universitarias de Zaragoza, Zaragoza, 1999.

Instituto Cervantes, *Buñuel, 100 años: es peligroso asomarse al Interior/ Buñuel, 100 Years: It's Dangerous to Look Inside*, Instituto Cervantes; Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2001.

Marsha Kinder, *Blood Cinema the Reconstruction of National Identity in Spain*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1993, pp. 278–338.

Marsha Kinder (ed.), *Luis Buñuel's The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York, 1999.

Adonis Kyrou, *Luis Buñuel: An Introduction*, Trans. Adrienne Foulke Simon and Schuster, New York, 1963.

Gastón Lillo (ed.), *Buñuel: el imaginario transcultural/L'imaginaire transculturel/The Transcultural Imaginary*, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, 2003.

Gastón Lillo, *Género y transgresión: el cine mexicano de Luis Buñuel*, Université Paul Valéry, C.E.R.S. (U.F.R.II), Montpellier, 1994. Joan Mellen (ed.), *The World of Luis Buñuel: Essays in Criticism*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1978.

Paulo Antonio Paranaguá, *El: Luis Buñuel*, Ediciones Paidós, Barcelona, 2001.

Residencia de Estudiantes, *Luis Buñuel: el ojo de la libertad*, Publicaciones de la Residencia de Estudiantes, Madrid, 2000.

Jeanne Rucar de Buñuel, *Memorias de una mujer sin piano*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1991.

Francisco Sánchez, *Siglo Buñuel*, Ediciones Casa Juan Pablos, Cineteca Nacional, Mexico City, 2000.

Agustín Sánchez Vidal, *Buñuel, Lorca, Dalí: el enigma sin fin*, Planeta, Barcelona, 1996.

Agustín Sánchez Vidal, *El mundo de Luis Buñuel*, Caja de Ahorros de la Inmaculada, Aragón, Zaragoza, 1993.

Paul Sandro, *Diversions of Pleasure: Luis Buñuel and the Crises of Desire*, Ohio State University Press, Columbus, 1987.

Jenaro Taléns, *The Branded Eye: Buñuel's Un Chien Andalou*, Trans. Giulia Colaizzi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993.

Marie-Claude Taranger, *Luis Buñuel: Le jeu et la loi*, Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, Saint-Denis, 1990.

Charles Tesson, *Luis Buñuel*, Cahiers du cinéma, Diffusion Seuil, Paris, 1995.

Linda Williams, *Figures of Desire: A Theory and Analysis of Surrealist Film*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1981.



## Articles in Senses of Cinema

**The Surreal Feel: Luis Buñuel**

**Un Chien andalou** by Michael Koller

**Los Olvidados** by Saul Austerlitz

**L'Age d'or: faux-raccord (false match)** by Sophy Williams



***The Phantom of Liberty*** by Marco Lanzagorta

***Belle de jour*** by **Michael Wood** book review by Jonathan Dawson

***Diary of a Chambermaid*** by Victoria Loy



## Web Resources

### Film Directors – Articles on the Internet

Many online articles can be found here.

### Luis Buñuel

"Luis Buñuel Remembered by Jean-Claude Carrière"

### The Savage Poetry of Luis Buñuel

Feature by Ed Gonzalez for *Slant* magazine. Includes in-depth discussions of his films.

### Luis Buñuel's Cinema of Entrapment in the Age of Cowardice: The Search for a Greater Truth

As part of the Questers Home Page site.

### The Official page of Buñuel's centenary

A well-designed and useful site. In Spanish only.

### Es peligroso asomarse al interior: Buñuel 100 años

Online and in Spanish only, this features a very thorough bibliography. Check out the visual introduction to "Buñuelia" (found under "obsesiones"), divided between "fauna", "the body and gestures" ("el cuerpo en sus gestos") and rituals ("rituals y simbolos"). With that, you can get a wonderful tour of the master's quirks.

### Agora Virtual

A Spanish site that mixes Buñuel's filmography with extracts from his memoirs. Includes a biography.

Click [here](#) to buy Luis Buñuel DVDs and videos at Facets



Click [here](#) to search for Luis Buñuel DVDs, videos and books at

