

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **SIMON OF THE DESERT / Simón del desierto (1965)** Luis Buñuel (1900-1983)

### OVERVIEW

**Auteur** Luis Buñuel is known as one of most influential surrealist filmmakers of the mid-twentieth century. Although he was born and raised near Zaragoza, Spain, he spent a large portion of his life and career as an exile in Paris and Mexico City. One of his earliest short films, *Le chien andalou* (1929), or the *Andalusian Dog*, became an iconic representation of eerie surrealist art in which Buñuel presented the audience with a series of unsettling, violent, and even erotic images plucked from a dream. Buñuel would continue in his surrealist style with such films as *L'Age D'or* (1930), or the *Age of Gold*. Later in his career, the director adapted novels and short stories to film and used the narratives to criticize the Francoist regime and expose the Catholic repression of the era. The middle period of Buñuel's career was characterized by several satirical and allegorical dramas based on Biblical stories and nineteenth-century Spanish novels. *Simon of the Desert* falls into this category, as the eponymous character is based on a saint. Buñuel's production in Mexico in the 1950s and 60s included *Nazarín* (1959), in which the eponymous priest attempts to administer to a rural Mexican community, and *The Exterminating Angel* (1962), a masterful critique of the bourgeoisie. In the last phase of his career, Buñuel returned to his hyper-erotic and surreal style in such films as *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972).

**Film** *Simon of the Desert* (1965) is a 45-minute black and white film about the eponymous saint, who administers to his flock from atop a column of stone in the desert. The concept of a seer who lives on top of a column was based on the story of Simeon Stylites, a Syrian monk from the 5<sup>th</sup> century C.E. Originally, Buñuel meant to shoot more footage in order to create a full-length film, but a lack of funds forced him to end the film with an incongruous scene in a night club in contemporary New York City. This avant-garde ending enhanced the film's surrealist style, as both the characters and the viewer are yanked out of the desert and time travel to the contemporary setting.

**Background** The majority of the scenes in this film were shot in the Samalayuca Dunes in Chihuahua, just south of Ciudad Juarez. As with many of his Mexican films, Buñuel worked with producer Gustavo Alatríste, cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa, and screenwriter Julio Alejandro. Buñuel's Mexican muse, Silvia Pinal, incarnates the shape-shifting devil who taunts Simón throughout the film. The film won various prizes at the Venice Film Festival of 1965. Many critics consider this truncated film one of Buñuel's best Mexican productions, and this positive critical reaction is underscored by its inclusion in the Criterion Collection.

### CHARACTERS

<i>Simón</i>	Ascetic who lives on and preaches from a column
<i>The Devil</i>	"Female shape-shifter" who taunts Simón
Brother Trifón	Possessed monk
<i>Brother Zenón</i>	Old monk / leader
<i>Brother Matías</i>	Vain / skipping monk
<i>The Debating Monk</i>	The other young monk who looks at the woman
<i>Simón's Mother</i>	Old woman who lives on the dunes next to the column
Mutilated Man	Thief whose hands were cut off for stealing
<i>The Goatherder</i>	Dwarf who chats with the visiting monks

### SYNOPSIS

Simón, a wizened old monk, lives on a column in the middle of the desert. Although he is separated from civilization, his mother lives below him in a hut. In addition, pilgrims come to him from surrounding towns

and missions. Simón is visited by peasants and farmers who ask for his help and miracles, as well as his fellow monks who wish to discuss his teachings.

Among the peasants, there is a thief whose hands were cut off and a dwarf goatherder who asks Simon to bless his flock. There are also several monks who visit and debate with Simón: an elder monk (Zenón), a vain monk (Matías), a questioning monk (who is not given a name), and a monk who is temporarily possessed by the devil (Trifón). When dealing with his brethren, Simón often chides the monks for their respective vices.

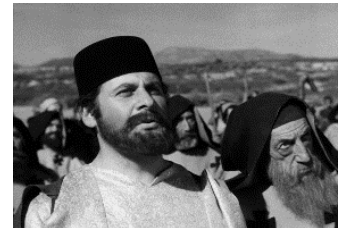
As part of his penitence, Simón rejects comfort, sustenance, and physical contact—although he longs for all three throughout the film. Despite his injuries and a lack of food and water, Simón remains perched on his column and preaches from on high.

The Devil, who usually takes the form of a beautiful woman, visits Simón several times. She incarnates several forms / characters, including a school girl and a bearded shepherd. Simón resists her taunts and interruptions until the very end of the film, when the monk and the devil are suddenly transported to a night club in downtown Manhattan. The Devil, now taking the form of a go-go style dancer, mingles with the crowd while Simón waits at the table—and this is the end of the film. The Devil acknowledges the abrupt finale, telling Simón that he has to bear “this ending”. So, too, does the viewer.

## SCENES

**Opening Credits** A long line of monks with black hoods walk on a pilgrimage as the credits roll. They sing a chant which is credited as “Himno de los peregrinos”, or Hymn of the Pilgrims. They approach Simón, who is standing on a column. Peasants gather around, as well.

**Switching Columns** One of the visiting priests speaks to Simon and reminds him that he has been standing on the column for 6 years, 6 weeks, and 6 days. The priest introduces Praxedes, a benefactor who has paid for a more luxurious column. They invite Simón to climb down so that he can continue his penitence and service to the community. The camera cuts to Simón standing with his arms crossed on his chest. Praxedes adds that he sponsored the column to show gratitude for Simón protecting him from evil. Two men bring over a wooden ladder.



**Crossing Between Columns** Simón descends slowly and limps across the ground between the two columns. The priests assist him and tell the swarming crowd of peasants to let him pass. One woman bends down to kiss his feet. Another woman, who is revealed to be Simón’s mother, come face to face with him. The priest suggests that Simon embrace his mother before he ascends the new column. Simón reluctantly agrees but reminds his mother that his love goes beyond physical limitation.

**Simón Refuses Ordainment** The same priest who introduced Praxedes tries to conduct an ordaining ceremony before Simón climbs the next column. He approaches Simón with a goblet, but the monk declares that he is a sinner who does not deserve the honor. The priest signs the cross over Simón’s head as he bows. Then, Simón proceeds to climb the column to the top.



**Simón’s Prayer and Miracle** Once at the top of the new column, Simón leads a prayer for the peasants below. One of the women yells out that her husband has no hands. Simón asks him what happened, and he reveals that his hands were cut off as a punishment for stealing. Simón does not promise a miracle, but asks the crowd to prayer with him. As the monk kneels, two men in the crowd whisper that they hope that they will be able to witness one of his miracles. When Simón rises from his knees, he tells the man to resume his chores. The man lowers his arms and notices that he now has hands.



**Peasants' Exodus** After the miracle of restoring his hands, the man looks at them and starts walking home. His wife remarks that they need to go shopping, and his daughter asks whether his new hands are the same as before. The man pushes his daughter and tells her to shut up. The rest of the peasants walk away while a group of priests decides to kneel and pray.

**The Devil Appears as a Woman Carrying a Jug** As the priests pray, a brunette woman passes by carrying a big jug on her shoulder. She reveals long painted nails as she brushes the stray hair from her face. When Simón asks whence the one-eyed woman came, one of the priests contradicts him, saying that the woman had two healthy eyes. Simón retorts that the priest swore not to look at a woman. Moreover, the priest was looking at her in such a manner as to admire her appearance. Simón goes on to say that the priest should not visit him again until he is able to control his "vision." The priests leave as Simón's mother looks up at him. The camera cuts to a low-angle shot of Simón extending his arms.



**The Priest and Goatherder Converse** Another young priest (later revealed to be Matías) approaches and greets the goatherder, a dwarf with a turban. The goat herder mentions that Simón is not on the column and he wanted him to bless his flock. The priest chides him for being impatient. The goat herder brags about the goat's voluptuous udder, and the priest advises him not to love his animals "that much." He blesses the dwarf and walks away quickly, but he turns back to warn the herder that the devil is meandering about the desert. The dwarf agrees and yells back that he hears the Devil at night. The priest skips away.



**The Gift of Lettuce** The skipping priest runs up to Simón's column where the monk is struggling to remember the end of a prayer. Matías shouts up at Simón that he has brought him food: not just lettuce as requested, but also bread and oil. Simón replies that he doesn't need anything apart from the lettuce, but he thanks the priest for his concern as he lowers a basket. The monk marvels that Simón is able to fast in such an extreme fashion, especially when he sees that Simón hardly ate any of the last delivery. Matías opens a gourd and declares that the old water is rotten. Simón pulls up the basket.

**Beware of Vanity** Matías asks if Simón needs anything else, and the monk replies no and gives him a blessing. Simón also compliments his tidy cassock and clean appearance, and the priest smiles and thanks him. Simón warns him that a man of the cloth should not be so invested in appearance. The priest does not react except to turn and start skipping away. An old woman chases chickens around while Simón watches Matías retreat.



**Simón's Will is Breaking** After the skipping priest disappears, Simón prays and bemoans the fact that he is influenced and distracted by his visitors. His prayers turn into an interior monologue of his thoughts. First, he thinks about how hungry and thirsty he is and how he has not been able to transcend bodily needs. He vows to wait until sunset to eat. Then, he thinks about how much he would like to climb down, feel the earth on his feet, and run around with his mother.

**Dreaming About His Mother** Simón's interior yearnings are played out in a dream sequence. He and his mother run around in circles, laughing. Then, we see Simón resting his head on his mother's lap while he plays with the sand and lets it slide through his fingers. We see the sequence is a dream due to the low-angle shot of the "real" Simón perched atop the column with arms outstretched. He watches the dream sequence below.



**The Devil as Schoolgirl** The devil, now dressed in a sailor dress with long blond pigtails, runs around the column. "She" plays with a hoop and sings a song in an affected little girl voice. Simón asks her whence she came and where she is headed, but the girl simply responds: "from there"



and there.” When he asks who she is, the devil replies, “I’m an innocent little girl.” She pulls up her skirt and reveals her thighs and garters.

**Simón Ignores the Devil** When Simón closes his eyes and starts praying, the devil (as the schoolgirl) appears on the column and pulls his beard. He keeps ignoring her as she stabs him in the back with a pin and licks his cheek. Simón moans in pain slightly but continues to close his eyes. When he opens them, the devil has turned into an old naked woman—now on the ground below him. The old woman runs away but turns to proclaim that she will be back.



**Breaking The Fast at Dusk** Simón sings a prayer, and his mother, who lives in a thatch hut nearby, emerges at the sound of his singing. Simón takes out the lettuce and starts to eat it slowly. He sees a bunny hop by below, and he throws down a remaining piece of the lettuce. As he brings the gourd to his lips to drink, the camera cuts to the inside of the hut where his mother lives. We see Simón’s mother drinking and preparing for bed.

**Water into Wine, Bread and Cheese** Simón prays on the columns to the assembled priests below. Brother Trifón, one of the frequent visiting monks, looks at the Simón’s food bag and notices that cheese, bread, and wine have miraculously appeared. The priest throws the cheese to his colleagues as proof, and Simón’s mother retrieves it and carries it with her. Brother Zenón, the elder monk, asks Simón how he managed these blessings, and Simón replies that a man on the column gets more blessings than a priest on the ground. Brother Trifón accuses Simón of evading questions. Simón’s mother see a hill of ants on the ground and covers them with sand. The goatherder voraciously eats the miracle bread and cheese.



**Brother Trifón’s Fit** Brother Trifón collapses in an epileptic fit. He rolls around on the ground with his mouth foaming. When he is able to stand up, he shouts “Death to apotheosis” and various ritual acts, some of which the other priests do not understand. Zenón and some of the others shout back “Life to” as a retort to Trifón. Simón warns that Trifón has been possessed and that the group should also expel the young skipping priest until he grows a “beard that covers his cheeks.”



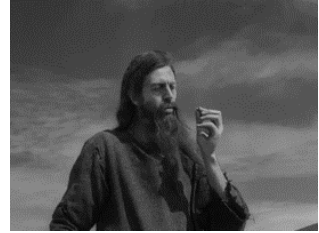
**Expelling Matías** Zenón takes the advice and tells Matías, the skipping priest, to return to the convent. Matías leaves with the goatherder, who repeats to the priest the same advice as before: “don’t love your animals so much.” Matías repeats what the dwarf said earlier: “I hear him (the Devil) at night.”

**Devil as Jesus / Shepherd** Simón’s mother carries firewood and looks up at Simón, who continues to stand but has big gashes on his shins. The devil approaches once again—this time dressed in white with a beard and ringlets. S/he carries a lamb in his/her arms and is followed by a flock of sheep. At first, the shepherd praises Simón’s penitence—now going on more than eight years--and the monk believes that God is speaking to him. However, when the shepherd suggests that Simón should give up, descend, and enjoy himself, Simón calls him / her out as Satan. The shepherd sets down the lamb and violently kicks it. He/she casts some sort of spell, and there is a quick cut to a close-up of one of the sheep followed by a bullfrog who suddenly disappears. The Devil vows to return.



**Perpetual Penitence** Simón prays again to God and bemoans the fact that he mistook the wolf for the lamb. He declares that he deserves to remain in penitence forever. He stands on one leg and vows to stay in that position until God calls him.

**Blessing All Creatures** The next morning, the monks and goatherder bring Simón his lettuce, and he stands again on two feet. Simón thanks God for his wisdom. When a grasshopper lands on his palm, Simón blesses it as one of God's creatures and launches it into the air. Because he is enjoying blessing animals, the goat herder shows Simón his pregnant goat. The dwarf asks for a blessing to help ease the animal's difficult pregnancy.



**The Dwarf is Irritated** Simón blesses man and goat, but the dwarf takes offence at the reference to his disability. Nonetheless, the goatherder promises to bring Simón fresh milk. Simón explains that he is trying to elevate his spirit so that his body can survive on very little, and he remarks that his feces are as dry as the goat's. The dwarf, irritated, walks away and mutters that he does not understand the monk.



**Philosophical Disagreement** The priest who looked at the woman visits Simón and climbs up the ladder. He asks Simón for forgiveness and warns him that pilgrims from Rome are coming towards him. Simón characterizes this pilgrimage as a blessing, but the priest describes it as a pretense for a religious war. The priest gives him an analogy of men fighting over belongings: he tries to steal Simón's food bag, and Simón protests, saying, "it's mine." When the priest refuses to return the bag, Simón agrees to relinquish it. The priest praises Simón's charity and will power, but warns that the average man would continue to fight. Simón does not disagree, but simply says, "We speak a different language."

**Devil in the Sliding Coffin** A coffin appears on top of a sand dune and slides down the hill. The coffin opens on its own, and the Devil, now a beautiful young woman with curly, short hair, declares that h/she is appearing to Simón for the last time. Simón yells from atop the column "Get thee back!" and prays while he stands on one leg. The camera cuts back and forth from the ground to the column, with both Simón and the Devil conversing on both planes. From atop the column, the Devil tries to convince Simón to come down and taste meat. A plane flies overhead, and both look up at it. The camera cuts abruptly to the column, which is now empty.



**Nightclub in New York** The camera cuts to the aerial view of New York City as the plane flies over skyscrapers. Then, there is a low-angle shot from the street looking up at the skyscrapers. The camera cuts abruptly again—this time to an electric guitar in a nightclub. The camera pans across the room for a full minute, where we see multiple pairs of young dancers dancing frenetically in the 60s style. Simón, now with a tailored goatee and mop-top hairdo, sits at a table and smokes a pipe. The Devil, now dressed in a flapper-style sixties dress with pearls, sits next to him and tells him it is the "last dance" called "*Carne radioactiva*" (Radioactive Flesh). Simón repeats his "Get thee behind me," and says that he wants to go home. The Devil tells him he can't leave and declares: "You'll have to bear this ending." The Devil gets up to dance with a young man and gyrates in a frenetic go-go style.



## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### SIMÓN

As an ascetic monk who lives for years on the column, Simón becomes a counselor and saint not only for the desert, but for the community. His penitence allows him to perform miracles and also improve the dedication of his fellow monks.

*Steadfast* Simón is able to withstand the hardships of his penitence for nearly a year without complaint. He maintains his fast, rejects the gifts and flattery of the others, stays on the column, and for the most part, resists the Devil's temptations.

*Imperious* Simón does not hesitate to chastise and expel the other monks for their sins or inappropriate behavior. Even when his visitors do not ask for advice, he preaches to them. He literally refuses to come down to his flock, which does suggest that he, too, engages in the sin of pride.

*Pure* Despite his "loss" to the Devil at the end of the film, Simón manages to stay true to his mission and ascetic lifestyle—until he is transported to the nightclub. He rejects the temptation of eating, feeling the ground, walking, and friendly or erotic interaction with his visitors. He succeeds somewhat in transcending the flesh in order to achieve a higher plane of enlightenment.

### THE DEVIL

The Devil, usually in the form of a girl or woman, visits Simón several times at his column. Each time, the Devil is attempting to convince Simón to give up on his penitence and climb down from the column. The Devil incarnates the following characters in her visits: a beautiful woman carrying a jug, a schoolgirl, a naked old woman, a Jesus-like shepherd, a seductive ghost, and a dancer in a flapper-style dress.

*Persistent* The Devil takes many forms and presents multiple arguments to convince Simón to abandon his sacrifice. S(he) tailors the arguments so as to speak to Simón's desires and ego, and she even pricks him in order to destabilize him. The other characters hear the Devil at night, which indicates that she is also "working on" the other inhabitants of the desert.

*Manipulative* Along with appealing to Simón's ego, the Devil also tempts him with the thought of eating meat, walking, and relaxing. When Simón attempts to ignore the arguments, she pretends to be a Jesus-like saint and an innocent girl. The performances are convincing enough to trick Simón into listening to the Devil's argument.

*Erotic* Although Simón does not appear to struggle with lust, the Devil uses her sexuality to manipulate and destabilize the monk. She reveals her legs and garters as the schoolgirl, and she extends her tongue and licks Simón several times throughout the film. In addition, Silvia Pinal's beauty and voluptuous body lure in the gaze of the viewer, even when Simón refuses to look at her.

### THE DEBATING MONK

Although this particular character does not have a name, his interactions with Simón are arguably the most significant among the monks that visit him. Early in the film, Simón admonishes this monk for looking at the woman carrying the jug (and this woman turns out to be the first form of the Devil). Near the end of the film, the same monk climbs up to Simón and proceeds to engage him in a philosophical debate. It could be argued that this particular monk's perspective represents Buñuel's own attitude towards religion.

*Covetous* Although the monk does not leer at the passing woman, his assessment of her suggests that he is still looking and admiring. Simón reminds him that a monk should refrain from looking all together.

*Pessimistic* When the monk climbs up to Simón, he does so in order to warn him about the zealots who are coming to visit him. Whereas Simón considers the influx of pilgrims a blessing, the monk worries that the zealots will provoke a religious war based on pride and greed.

## THEMES

### SOCIETY

#### Religion

**Penitence** Simón remains on the column because he believes that his sacrifice purifies himself and aids the community. Along with standing on the column, he also punishes himself by refusing to eat or drink well (or regularly). When he falls for the Devil's trickery, he increases his punishment by forcing himself to stand on one leg. Even in the early scene of the film where Simón walks from one column to the other, he denies himself praise from the other monks and affection from his mother. The austerity of the penitence is increased when Simón declares his intention to live on the column forever. Aside from engaging in the purifying punishment, Simón also uses the penitence to test his ability to transcend the physical plane. Although Simón is able to perform miracles and advise his fellow monks, the ambiguity of the film's ending indicates that the monk's sacrifice did not fully achieve his objectives. The frenetic dancing to the song "Radioactive Flesh" smacks of an apocalypse or nuclear fall-out, and Simón is in the basement nightclub with the other sinners. He did not ascend to heaven after nine years of penance, and perhaps it is this disappointing ending that Simón must accept in the last moments of the film.

**Seven Deadly Sins** The Devil tries to incite desire and resentment in Simón so that he gives up his penitence. She tempts him by provoking his pride, lust, gluttony, and sloth, among other sins. The various visitors also exemplify specific sins. The possessed monk displays anger—not only is he literally foaming at the mouth, but he is also verbally condemning the rituals of the Church. The skipping monk acts out vanity by being overly concerned with the tidiness of his cassock. In addition, the skipping suggests a frivolous nature that does not comport with a monk's duties and sacrifices. Finally, the debating monk inadvertently covets the woman who passes by. In each case, Simón pinpoints the bad behavior and admonishes the monk for flirting with sin. The peasants of the desert indulge in some questionable behavior, such as the goat herder loving his animals "too much." Pride imbues the characters in general as they all seek attention and commendation, and even Simón falls into this trap on occasion.

**Rituals** As a Jesus-like figure, Simón performs rituals and miracles from atop the column. There are two overt miracles in the film: the first is restoring hands to the thief, and the second is converting the water and lettuce in his food basket into cheese, bread, and wine. The latter miracle is an obvious reference to the Eucharist, as Simón gives the bread to those below. Simón also enjoys blessing his visitors and the innocent animals he encounters. Moreover, the concept of a fast in the desert (and the constant temptation from the devil) references Lent and Jesus's own moments of torment in the desert. The frequent close-ups on the gashes on Simón's calves and shins references both Jesus's wounds and other saints' physical pain/sacrifice. Early in the film, the priests attempt to perform a ritual in order to ordain Simón, but he refuses the honor. However, he encourages his visitors to engage in their own penitence and rituals. From the very first moments of the film, we hear the pilgrims singing a monastic chant that is repeated several times. The pilgrimage to the desert becomes a recurring ritual and one that Simón welcomes. The question remains whether the journey provides the purification or answers that the visitors seek. In some cases, the implication is that neither the villagers nor the priests change their behavior after encountering Simón.

#### QUEST

**Introspection** Simón's primary goals are to purify himself and transcend the flesh. His placement on the column separates him from others while also bringing him closer to God and at times, closer to animals. His meditation is assisted through the desolation and isolation of the desert, although he does interact with his mother below and the daily pilgrims. In addition, Simón denies himself food apart from lettuce, and he even rejects the goatherder's milk. His fasting and isolation brings him closer to nature—in particular, the birds and insects who can fly up to him. Simón also engages in constant prayer when he is not preaching to visitors below. In some ways, this ascetic severity is effective: he builds up his physical and psychological stamina, and he is able to ignore the erotic flirtations and manipulations of the Devil. On the other hand, Simón does not succeed in transcending hunger, thirst, and yearning all together. He is tempted by earthly desires, even though he manages to resist them. Moreover, his nine

years of introspection may have been all for naught, as he ends up watching the Devil dance at the end of the film.

## **ETHICS**

**Duty** While Simón is performing an act of penitence and internal reflection, he also takes it upon himself to interact with the community. His individual purification acts as a purification of those around him, as well. It is for this reason that Praxedes funds a “nicer” column for Simón to continue his service and sacrifice. Simón’s interactions with others echo those of Jesus (see **Rituals** below): he performs blessings and miracles regularly, he preaches to the assembled crowd, and he debates with the monks of the old guard. However, Simón’s efforts often result in lackluster results. He is never able to banish the Devil completely—she keeps coming back, and she haunts the inhabitants of the desert at night. Simón’s chiding of the monks’ behavior rarely leads to repentance or change. Even the thief whose hands are restored immediately returns to his bad behavior. The goatherder does not understand Simón’s message. The implication is that while the monks and peasants want to visit Simón and receive his blessings, they do not wish to learn or repent. The ambiguous ending also suggests that Simón’s nine years on the column did not make a true impact.

## **APPEARANCE**

**Deception** The most overt deception is that of the Devil: she takes many forms, she lies, and she manipulates. The visual tricks that she uses confuse and distract both Simón and the viewer. We don’t always know which character is the devil and why she takes that particular form. Each character has her own accessories that are meant to trick or titillate. For the shepherd character, the Devil wears a beard, and for the schoolgirl, the Devil wears blond pigtails. The physical position of the Devil also changes constantly: one moment, she is on the ground, another moment she is on the column, and another moment she is running in circles or running away. This frenetic movement disorients both Simón and the viewer. Buñuel and Figueroa enhance this effect through their use of jarring cuts and extreme low and high angle shots throughout the film. Along with disrupting the narrative thread, the cuts incite a sort of visual vertigo in the viewer. Finally, we could say that Simón is deceiving himself in that he dreams of an ultimate purification that cannot be achieved. Moreover, his influence on the community and his fellow monks is temporary at best.

## **PSYCHOLOGY**

**Alienation** As a part of his penance, Simón separates himself from society, “civilization,” and even his mother. Even when Simón is on the ground temporarily, he rejects the embraces of his mother. During the dream sequence, Simón yearns for physical contact even more than food or water: he wishes to rest his head on his mother’s lap. Both columns are erected in the middle of nowhere so that Simón can reflect and so that the visitors have to take a pilgrimage to get to the isolated destination. Although Simón can interact with visitors, the dynamics of the conversation keep a literal distance between the aesthetic and his flock. Simón must shout down to his visitors, and they must shout up to him or climb the ladder. Simón’s status “on high” also alienates him psychologically from the others, and he often takes an imperious attitude towards those below. There is frequent miscommunication, especially when the goat herder is perplexed by Simón’s refusal to drink goat’s milk. The one character who meets Simón at his level is the Devil, who uses her physical proximity to wound and lick Simón. As a result, much of Simón’s sacrifice is being alone on the column.

**Isolation** Along with the lack of company and conversation, the landscape of the film is one of isolation. The column stands amidst primordial sand dunes and away from resources or people. Although the pilgrims visit, Simón is eventually left alone on the pillar. Even his mother, who lives in a hut below, can only exchange furtive looks with him. The dunes stretch out for miles in all directions, and Simón is the one who sees from the eagle-eye viewpoint. In addition, the column itself creates a sense of isolation. Simón is so far up in the sky that he exists on another plane. As literary critic Lars Novak notes, the environment around Simón is one of extreme horizontality (the landscape stretching out to the horizon) and extreme verticality (he stands closer to the plane in the sky than to his flock below). Ironically, Simón is still somewhat isolated even when he is transported to the crowded nightclub.

Everyone, including the Devil, dances with a partner. Simón is left at the table to contemplate the ambiguous ending, and he cannot even leave.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the significance of the shape-shifting characters of the Devil? Why does the Devil keep coming back in different forms?
2. Is Simón's penitence successful? Does he help his fellow monks or the peasants who visit him?
3. How do you interpret the ending of the film in the nightclub? Does the prolonged dance mean that the Devil has won and Simón has lost?
4. There are several jarring or abrupt cuts in this film. What is the effect of this style of editing?
5. What is the effect of the low and high-angle shots of the column?
6. How is Buñuel's style surreal in this film?
7. How does music and silence affect the tone and message of the film? Consider the chants, the drums, and the 60s rock music in the club.