

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Tracie Amend, Ph.D.

Luis Buñuel (1900-1983)

LIFE

Luis Buñuel was born in a small town named Calenda, which lies just slightly northwest of Zaragoza in northeast Spain. Although the inhabitants of the town suffered from poverty and what Buñuel described as a medieval culture, the Buñuels were relatively comfortable. Luis's father Leonardo was a prominent (and eventually, rich) businessman who married a much younger woman named María Portolés Cerezuela. As a result, Luis grew up rather comfortably with a good education, despite the fact that he was the eldest of seven children. His introduction to and love of film came early in his life, as he frequented the local cinema as a boy. Luis often entertained his family and neighbors by casting shadows on a hanging bedsheet and narrating an accompanying story. Ironically, Luis was also deeply religious and dedicated to the Catholic faith until his later teen years. At 16, the future director broke with Church due to a resentment of illogical doctrine and hypocrisy.

As a young man, Luis studied agricultural and entomology at the University of Madrid, but ultimately decided that he wished to pursue film in France. He lived and worked in Paris between 1925-1930, at the height of avant-garde expression in all media of the arts. He collaborated continuously with his fellow Madrid alumnus Federico García Lorca (who became an important playwright and poet in the 1930s) and Salvador Dalí (who is still associated with the "invention" of Spanish surrealism). Dalí, in particular, helped Buñuel to create his early surrealist aesthetic in *An Andalusian Dog* (1929) and *The Age of Gold* (1930). Despite their fruitful collaboration, the trio did not get along well as time passed. Part of the tension derived from Lorca's homosexuality / attraction to Dalí. Dalí was rumored to be asexual with a queer sensibility, whereas Buñuel was straight and interested in at least a somewhat traditional marriage.



Buñuel courted and married his longtime French wife, Jeanne Rucor, in the early 1930s. The two would travel together and stayed married their whole lives, as well as raise two boys. Women who worked with Buñuel said that he remained very loyal to his wife on and off the set. Angela Molina, who played the lead Conchita in Buñuel's last film, remarked that the director became flustered during the scenes in which she revealed her breasts, even to the point that he covered her up or averted his eyes between takes.



When the Spanish Civil War broke out in 1936, Buñuel and his new bride had to adapt to the tenuous political climate in Spain. When the Nationalists won the war in 1939, General Francisco Franco became dictator of Spain and remained in power until his death in 1975. Franco and the Nationalists pursued and arrested left-wing artists who either fought on the Republican side or espoused Communist or Socialist ideals. Lorca was among the activist artists who was executed, but Buñuel managed to escape and live in exile for the majority of Franco's dictatorship.

At first, Buñuel tried to work in the U.S. He considered becoming a more mainstream director in Hollywood, then he spent a few months as an advisor for the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Neither trajectory fit, so Buñuel moved to Mexico City (where he would spend the majority of his life) in 1946. As a featured director in the Churubusco Studio in the capital city, Buñuel had the opportunity to work with well-established Mexican producers, writers, musicians, and cinematographers. He churned out multiple films in the 1950s, from bleak pseudo-documentaries such as *The Young and the Damned* (1950) to melodramas and thrillers. In the 1960s, Buñuel created some of his most influential Mexican dramas, such as *Viridiana* (1961) and *The Exterminating Angel* (1962).

As Franco's dictatorship softened in the 1960s and 1970s, Buñuel had the opportunity to film *Tristana* (1970), an adaptation of a famous Spanish novel, on location in Spain. Some of his leftist colleagues felt as though he were capitulating to fascism by returning to Spain, but Buñuel leapt at the opportunity to create art in his homeland.

After the filming of *Tristana*, Buñuel experienced a remarkable third act as a Parisian filmmaker. He collected his favorite French-speaking actors, his long-time co-writer Jean Le Carrière, and plucky producer Serge Silberman. In the last years of his life, Buñuel shot some of his most critically -acclaimed films: *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972), *The Phantom of Liberty* (1974), and his last film, *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977). Buñuel filmed each one on the streets of Paris and relished the opportunity to create deliciously erotic and satirical films.

Although Buñuel continued developing ideas, storylines, and scripts for future film projects, his poor health prevented him from pursuing any one particular film aggressively. He spent the last few days of his life discussing theology with his friend and Jesuit brother Julián Pablo Fernández. He died in his bed in Mexico City, surrounded by his wife Jeanne and his sons Juan Luis and Rafael, in 1983 at the age of 83.

FILMS

Un chien andalou / An Andalusian Dog (1929)
L'age D'or / The Age of Gold (1930)
Las Hurdes / Tierra sin pan / Land Without Bread (1933)
Gran casino / Big Casino (1947)
El gran calavera / The Great Madcap (1949)
Los olvidados / The Forgotten Ones / The Young and the Damned (1950)
Susana / Carne y demonio / The Devil's Flesh (1951)
La hija del engaño / The Daughter of Deceit (1951)
Una mujer sin amor / Woman Without Love (1952)
Subida al Cielo / Ascent to Heaven / Mexican Bus Ride (1952)
Él / This Strange Passion (1953)
El bruto / The Brute (1953)
La ilusión viaja en travía / Illusion Travels by Streetcar (1954)
Abismos de pasión / Wuthering Heights (1954)
Robinson Crusoe (1954)
El río y la muerte / The River and Death (1954)
Ensayo de un crimen / Rehearsal of a Crime / The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz (1955)
La mort en ce jardin / Death in the Garden / The Diamond Hunters (1956)
Cela s'appelle l'aurore / That is the Dawn (1956)
La fièvre monte à El Pao / Fever Rises in El Pao / The Republic of Sin (1959)
Nazarín (1959)
La joven / The Young One (1960)
Viridiana (1961)
El ángel exterminador / Exterminating Angel (1962)
Le journal d'une femme de chambre / Diary of a Chambermaid (1964)
Belle de Jour (1967)
La voie lactée / The Milky Way (1969)
Tristana (1970)
Le charme discret de la bourgeoisie / Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie (1972)

Fantôme de la liberté / Phantom of Liberty (1974)

Cet obscur objet du désir / That Obscure Object of Desire (1977)

THEMES

SOCIETY

Class Buñuel's commentary on class usually consists of satirizing the bourgeoisie. The characters remain securely within the confines of their homes, or if they venture outside, they convene in restaurants and bars. When the privileged live in the country, they enjoy hunting or leisurely walks through the forest. Despite (or perhaps because of) their level of comfort, the bourgeois characters often long for a subversive activity or the opportunity to indulge in taboo sexuality. This unsatisfied desire becomes a motivating force in both Buñuel early surrealist films as well as his later French *oeuvre*; however, the erotically-charged protagonists rarely gain satisfaction. In some specific cases, Buñuel also exposes the blight of poverty on both rural and urban society. In his quasi-documentaries *Land Without Bread* (1933) and *The Young and the Damned* (1950), Buñuel reveals the extreme challenges and tragedies with which the poor must contend: hunger, desperation, disease, disability, and victimization.

Religion Along with the frequent critique of the bourgeoisie, Buñuel satirizes the Catholic Church and religious doctrine in nearly all of his films. At times, Buñuel takes aim at the Catholic rituals that the characters perform, many of which result in little positive effect. A frequent target of Buñuel's dubious attitudes towards Catholicism is the enactment of the Eucharist, featured prominently in both *Belle de Jour* (1967) and the *Milky Way* (1969). The frequent inclusion of priests, monks, and nuns in Buñuel's films only serve to underscore the lack of logic, morality, or humility among the clergy. Even when the protagonists attempt to administer to the poor or troubled, such as the nun Viridiana and the priest Nazario, the clergy end up raped, beaten, or robbed. Biblical stories and early Christian prophets provide the foundation for several of the plotlines of Buñuel's films, from the parallels with Jesus's life in *Nazarín* (1959) and *The Milky Way* (1969) to the story of ascetic Simon in *Simon of the Desert* (1965). The female characters frequently embody the virtue and chastity of the Virgin Mary (at least initially), then give into the man's or their own desire and sexual curiosity. There are also a handful of prostitutes (most overtly Ándara in *Nazarín*) who are obvious references to Mary Magdalene. Although these biblically-themed films pay homage to the source text, the virtuous characters often become disillusioned when they fail to compel their flock to change their ways. Neither the Church nor the scriptures nor rituals save the characters—they often end up in a worse condition or circumstance than where they started.



Nature and Science As a student of agronomy and lover of insects, Buñuel regularly emphasized flora and fauna—sometimes to contextualize a farm or ranch setting, and sometimes to construct a jarring surrealist nightmare or avant-garde sequence (see *Bestial Imagery* in the *Storytelling Devices* section below for more). The inclusion of insects and beasts enhanced the creations of Buñuel's rural worlds: the mountainous villages and forests of Las Hurdes in *Land Without Bread* (1933), the tropics of the lush yet foreboding island in *Robinson Crusoe* (1954), the foreboding mountain mines and lowland jungles of Brazil in *Diamond Hunters* (1956), and the vast country estates and forests in *Susana* (1951), *Viridiana* (1961) and *Diary of a Chambermaid* (1964). Even the dramas and satires set in the heart of Mexico City or Paris contain travel or fantasy sequences that take place in nature. It is clear that Buñuel appreciated natural beauty but also recognized its danger: often, the human characters face death and disease due to exposure, viruses, or predators of the environment. In addition, Buñuel incorporated geographical, biological, or entomological



lessons into the plotline of some of his films. When the characters travel (especially on a pilgrimage), Buñuel ensures that the viewers understand the route, landmarks, and landscape of the journey. When the characters work as farmers or ranchers, there is usually at least one monologue in which the male protagonist or secondary character explains their techniques. Despite the illogical surrealist sensibility in Buñuel's *oeuvre*, the director also infused his dramas with an appreciation for scientific methods.

POLITICS

Power Clearly, Buñuel pitted himself against the Nationalist dictatorship in Spain, as well as other oppressive regimes in Latin America in the last years of his life. His communist and anarchic sensibilities manifested at first in the shocking avant-garde aesthetic of Spanish surrealism, then later in protest sequences set in the 1920s and 30s (but included in films of the 1960s and 70s). In *Tristana* (1970), the police shut down a union strike and protest. In *Diary of a Chambermaid* (1964), a fascist parade winds its way down a street while protesters chant "Vive Chiappe"—a specific reference to Buñuel's standoff with a Parisian chief of police during the run of his controversial film *The Age of Gold* (1930). Buñuel's films also include a general criticism of ineffectual governments and state bureaucracy. In both *Land Without Bread* (1933) and *The Young and the Damned* (1950), Buñuel included a postscript and prologue, respectively, in which he directly criticizes the Spanish and Mexican governments for not helping the poor people on the edge of society. In the case of Spain, the power at the time were the leftist leaders of the Second Republic (1931-1939), whose in-fighting and inefficiency contributed to the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). In the case of Mexico, Buñuel criticized mid-century modern capitalism and emphasized the fact that peasants and workers had just as poor a quality of life as they did before the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920).

War Buñuel alludes to three wars or conflicts throughout his oeuvre. As a Spanish citizen and long-time exile, the director was an oblique victim of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and subsequent dictatorship (1939-1975). For a brief period, he worked on propaganda films for the Republicans (the leftist party), but left when the Nationalists won the war. This national trauma creeps into some of Buñuel's films in exile (see Allegory below). When Buñuel first arrived in Mexico City in the 1940s, the population was one generation removed from the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920). The Revolution's purpose was to redistribute land to the poor and create a sense of Mexican national identity apart from U.S. and European barons, investors, and politicians. However, the modern capitalism at mid-century did not fulfill the promise of the Revolution, which led to the continued oppression of indigenous people and the working class. Buñuel underscores this sociopolitical failure in many of his Mexican films that feature desperate and impoverished characters. Finally, Buñuel's last few films, although centered on bourgeois sexuality and hypocrisy, also contained references to European and Latin American unrest in the late 60s and early 70s. Fiery union workers and terrorist attacks interrupt the bourgeois trysts and dinners. In *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972), the police arrest the would-be diners and torture a young man presumed to be a terrorist. In these later films, Buñuel acknowledges the residual or current effects of oppressive dictatorships and the political instability of the period.

JUSTICE

Crime A common thread in Buñuel's oeuvre is the male protagonist's desire for violent sexual conquest. The characters who indulge their lds end up attacking the women they desire, from the Man chasing the Young Girl around the apartment in *An Andalusian Dog* (1929), to Francisco strangling his wife Gloria in *This Strange Passion* (1953), to Archibaldo fantasizing about strangling, stabbing, and incinerating the attractive women he encounters in *Rehearsal of a Crime* (1955). Rape and murder abound in Buñuel's rural settings, as well, including the attempted gang rape of Viridiana by the rural vagabonds, the immoral seduction of Evalyn by her adult male guardian in *The Young One* (1960), and the rape and murder of the young girl Claire in *Diary of a Chambermaid* (1964). In the quasi documentary *The Young and the Damned* (1950), the slums of Mexico City are replete with criminals and gang violence, the latter leading to two brutal murders. In Buñuel's later movies, there are frequent allusions to terrorist attacks and international drug deals. Whereas Buñuel's earlier films focused more on crime as a symptom of Mexican societal decay, the later films juxtapose large-scale, international crime with bourgeois love and sex.

Injustice Often, the violent crimes committed in nearly all of Buñuel's films (see paragraph above) go unpunished. The homicidal gallants of the 1950s thrillers do not receive punishment for their

attempted murders apart from their own nagging conscience. The poor and vulnerable end up bearing rape, theft, and incest, as poverty begets chaos. Two murders, in particular, gnaw at the viewer: the dumped body of the young boy Pedro in the *Young and the Damned* (1950), and the police's nonchalant response to the murder of the young girl Claire in *Diary of a Chambermaid* (1964). The suave criminals of Buñuel's later films profit from their drug deals and kickbacks. Buñuel obliquely criticizes his own dictator (Franco), but also satirizes the growing number of autocratic governments in Latin America. Often, police officials and military men are on the take and complicit with either the gangs or the dictators. We see the rot of corruption and chaos in such films as the *Diamond Hunters* (1956), where the army stages a coup to control the diamond mines, bribes informants, and displaces the miners and their families.

Violence Buñuel frequently explores violence as it relates to taboo sexuality, particularly with regard to sadomasochism and rape. Arguably the most jarring moments of violence, however, occur in the more realistic and less surreal films of Buñuel's early and middle periods. In *Land Without Bread* (1933), Buñuel and his crew filmed a long on-site sequence of a festival in the mountains where bachelors tear off the heads of live roosters. In his other commentary on the effects of poverty, the *Young and the Damned* (1950), the teenage hooligans are constantly committing violent acts on the old, disabled, or each other. There is also the violence that springs from desperation and a fear of death. In both the *Diamond Hunters* (1956) and *Exterminating Angel* (1962), a group of people are trapped without food or water. Some characters commit violence on the weaker members of the group in order to survive.



RELATIONSHIP

Motherhood In Buñuel's adaptation of the Spanish novels of Galdós--*Nazarín*, *Viridiana* and *Tristana*--the parental relationship at play is that of the young woman being shepherded by a male guardian. The mother is dead or nowhere to be found. Occasionally, the French films include a mother figure who influences the trajectory of the plot, such as the religious zealot Encarnación in *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977) or Celestine's decision to protect and avenge the orphan Claire in *Diary of a Chambermaid* (1964). However, motherhood is explored most deeply in Buñuel's Mexican dramas of the 1950s. Often, the mother tries to protect her son from poverty, sexual predators, and crime, but is unable to fight the societal forces that oppress the family. Marta, Pedro's mother in the *Young and the Damned* (1950), fails to keep her son away from gang life. Ironically, she incarnates both sides of sexual predation, as she was raped as a young girl but also seduces El Jaibo, who in a disturbingly erotic scene, considers Marta as a maternal figure. In *Simon of the Desert* (1965), Simon's mother lives in a tent at the base of her son's column and tries to fortify his efforts to remain pure. Even when the family is well-to-do, such as in *Susana* (1951), the benevolent matriarch Carmen is unable to break Susana's spell as she seduces every man on the ranch. Despite usually pure motives, the mothers in Buñuel's dramas are outmatched by circumstance, poverty, and psychology.

Marriage Buñuel usually portrays marriage as a bourgeois construct that represses and suppresses sexuality. When the paternal Don Juan ends up seducing and marrying his ward, she immediately feels trapped and tries to escape. She also rebels by having an affair with a young artist. Even when the ingenue is fortunate enough to have a kind, supportive, and young husband, as in *Belle de Jour* (1967), Séverine (the protagonist) feels stifled and decides to break away by becoming a prostitute. The psychopathic Francisco and Archibaldo use marriage as a tool for domination and punishment, while the embittered Don Quintín in *The Daughter of Deceit* (1951) literally gives away his baby daughter when he discovers his wife's infidelity. The members of the clergy evade marriage so that they can pursue careers or spiritual purity, such as Viridiana's attempts to become a nun and maintain her virginity. For the abject poor or working-class characters, marriage is a necessary means of survival. If the women are raped or abandoned, they are doubly victimized and doomed to lose their children.

PSYCHOLOGY

Madness / Psychosis Buñuel often presents his audiences with two levels of psychological problems. The milder level is that of repressed desires, kinks, obsessions, and in the case of some female characters, frigidity or hysteria (or sometimes both). The characters strive to work out their sexual proclivities either by attempting to stifle them or indulging their desire. Often, neither method leads to sexual satisfaction or happiness. The second, more dangerous level of psychological problems is homicidal tendencies, violence, psychopathy, or complete breaks with reality. Arguably the “craziest” female character in Buñuel’s *oeuvre* is Susana, who literally escapes from an insane asylum. Often, the male antiheroes of the 1950s dramas and thrillers indulge in their violent fantasies and completely lack a moral compass. El Jaibo brutally kills two defecting gang members in the neorealistic *The Young and the Damned* (1950), and Archibaldo and Francisco both descend into homicidal and paranoid madness (in *Rehearsal of a Crime* and *This Strange Passion*, respectively). Finally, there are several well-meaning characters who lose their minds due to extreme circumstances, including Beatriz in *Nazarín* (1959), Castin, the old man facing death from exposure in the jungle in *Diamond Hunters* (1956), and the bourgeois guests who remained trapped in the living room without food or water in *The Exterminating Angel* (1962).



Sexuality

Desire and the Gaze The focus on the young, beautiful (and often blond) ingenue as the object of the male gaze is hardly specific to Buñuel’s *oeuvre*, but the director also (on occasion) frames the male characters as objects of the female gaze or desire. In several of Buñuel’s later films, the older Don Juan character acts as a father figure to the young woman, then seduces her or coerces her into a sexual relationship. She rebels by pursuing or sleeping with a young buck. We see iterations of this erotic triangle of desire in films ranging from the melodramatic thriller *Susana* (1951) to Bunuel’s last film, *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977). The young woman gains some agency by rejecting the older man’s advances and exploring her own sexual desires with other men. In some cases, such as in the melodrama *Susana*, the female lead is the seductress. In other cases, the female characters wrestle with their own taboo sexuality and lusting after what they cannot have, such as the Young Girl characters in Buñuel’s silent films, the erotically-charged peasant Beatriz in *Nazarín* (1959), or the afternoon prostitute Séverine in *Belle de Jour* (1967). Whether the desire emanates from the male or female protagonist (or both), Buñuel’s characters frequently unleash their illicit desires and fantasies after a long period of repression.



Fetishism Like Hitchcock and many other directors of his generation, Buñuel employs the scopophilic nature of the camera to fetishize the female body. The male characters gaze at the women, and Buñuel cuts to close-ups of their feet and exposed legs. The frequent close-ups on feet and shoes appears in several Buñuel films, including the opening scene in *This Strange Passion* (1953) and one of the most iconic scenes in *Diary of a Chambermaid* (1964), where the aging patriarch of the estate asks the maid Celestine to put on and model vintage boots. In Bunuel’s earliest films, the vagina also becomes fetishized obliquely through the use of dark circles, keyholes, and purses with locks (all of which appear in Bunuel’s silent short *An Andalusian Dog*). At times, articles of



clothing and accessories are invested with erotic meaning, such as schoolgirl uniforms, hats, embroidered blouses or skirts, dresses, and earrings or necklaces. It should also be noted that severed hands and the lack of a limb (or its prosthetic replacement) are often framed fetishistically. The most well-known example is Tristana's prosthetic leg laying on the living-room floor in *Tristana* (1970). Although it occurs less frequently, Buñuel also fetishizes male characters by using close-ups on their torsos and hands and through the frequent focus on phallic props: canes, paintbrushes, and of course, the nearly ubiquitous close-up on rifles and pistols.

Sadomasochism One of Buñuel's favorite texts was the Marquis de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom* (1785) (the plot of which is even acted out at the end of *Age of Gold* from 1930 and in a brief scene in *The Milky Way* of 1969). It is of little surprise, then, that Buñuel explored sadomasochistic sex and fantasies within many of his characters' relationships. In an early scene in *The Age of Gold* (1930), the Young Girl dreams about murdering her children, and in *An Andalusian Dog* (1929), the Man is aroused after watching a car run over a woman. Several characters display sadistic tendencies, including the psychopathic sculptor Archibaldo in *Rehearsal of a Crime* (1955), the violent vagabonds in *Viridiana* (1961), and the homicidal, strangler caretaker Joseph in *Diary of a Chambermaid* (1964). The imagery of bondage as both pleasure and punishment appears in several films, including Francisco's plan to sew up his wife's vagina in *This Strange Passion* (1953), and Séverine's fantasies about being tied up in *Belle de Jour* (1967). In *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977), Conchita evades intercourse by wearing stitched-up breaches. In several of the toxic sexual relationships, the characters vacillate between sadism and masochism (and the positions of power change with it).



FLAWS

Obsession Often, Buñuel's characters are obsessed with sexual conquest or satisfaction. We see unrequited, obsessive sexual desire in Buñuel's first and last films: the unnamed male characters in *An Andalusian Dog* (1929) and *The Age of Gold* (1930) pursue the Young Girl characters but never consummate their desire, and Conchita always denies Mathieu sex in *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977). The lack of satisfaction drives both the plot and the protagonists' obsessions. The obsession grows and consumes some characters to the point of violence or madness. Francisco in *This Strange Passion* (1953) is obsessed with catching his wife sleeping with other men, and Archibaldo in *Rehearsal of a Crime* (1955) fantasizes continually about murdering the women in his life. The young criminal Marcel becomes infatuated with Séverine in *Belle de Jour* (1967) and shoots her husband, Pierre.

Jealousy Erotic triangles and affairs occur frequently in Buñuel's films. While a handful of characters act nonchalantly when faced with a potential rival (such as Pierre's calm demeanor towards his potential rival Henri in *Belle de Jour*), the majority of husbands and male lovers feel resentment and jealousy toward their rivals. The old Don Juans who seduce their wards try to control their much younger wife or lover, which results in her affair with a younger man. The young lovers also lash out in jealousy, such as Alberto confronting his father in *Susana* (1951) or Marcel shooting Séverine's husband Pierre in *Belle de Jour* (1967). Likely the most jealous characters are the psychopaths who consider their wives and lovers their property—the exemplar is Francisco in *This Strange Passion* (1953), who torments his wife Gloria without mercy and whose jealousy leads him to strangle her and attempt to sew up her vagina. Honorable mentions go to the violent stalkers Pinto in *Nazarín* (1959) and Marcel in *Belle de Jour* (1967). On occasion, female characters lash out against their rivals, such as when the normally docile Carmen whips Susana as a punishment for seducing her husband and son.



QUEST

Search As discussed at length in the sections on desire and obsession above, the primary motivation for many of Buñuel's characters is sexual gratification. The characters want to indulge their Ids and act out their sexual fantasies. Sometimes, such as with several characters in *Diary of a Chambermaid* (1964) or Séverine in *Belle de Jour* (1967), the characters quench their taboo or criminal desires but with disastrous consequences. Sometimes, the characters yearn for love and acceptance, especially in the neorealistic films with neglected children, disabled poor, or abandoned wives. In other cases, the characters are motivated by greed, such as with Chark the thief and Djin the madame in *Diamond Hunters* (1956). Still others thirst for spiritual truth or purity (such as the priest Nazario and reformed peasant woman Beatriz in *Nazarín* (1959), or the various pilgrims and disciples featured in the *The Milky Way* of 1969). Both the tragedy and satire in Buñuel's films derive from the inability to gain or retain love, sex, stability, faith, or fortune. More often than not, the adults do not get satisfaction, the children do not find stability or affection, and the pious end up losing their faith (or at least experience an existential crisis). Moreover, the characters do not reach their destination, but rather remain in an unending loop. In the cases where the characters are trapped in a life-or-death situation (such as the jungle in *Diamond Hunters*, the mostly deserted island in *Robinson Crusoe* (1954), and the living room of death in *Exterminating Angel*), the search is for an escape. In all three films, some characters get out, and others perish.

Exploration Buñuel's films often reflect the individual's yearning to explore themselves—in particular, their own sexuality and psyche—to know themselves. It is for this reason that so many of Buñuel's more surrealist films provide dream sequences or fantasies in which the characters may imagine themselves in erotic situations. In addition, some of Buñuel's more "commercial" films provide a literal adventure in which the characters venture out into the wilderness or travel in unknown territory. Several protagonists literally leave the city in order to explore the country: the rebels in *Age of Gold* (1930) live communally in a shack alongside the ocean, Celestine travels to a rural town in order to find work, and Jean and Pierre commit to a long pilgrimage in which they walk on foot from Paris to Santiago de Compostela in *The Milky Way* (1969). Viridiana is encouraged to leave the convent in order to help sort out the family's ranch. Even Susana, the psychopathic seductress, escapes the asylum and finds refuge on a country estate. At times, the characters turn into tourists within Buñuel's mini travelogues: the Man in *An Andalusian Dog* (1929) and the bourgeois Parisians enjoy walking through the streets of Rome and Paris. In *This Strange Passion* (1953), Francisco and Gloria take pictures of the striking buildings in Guadalajara. Jean and Pierre enjoy the breathtaking view of San Sebastian in *The Milky Way*, and Mathieu dines al fresco as he looks over the Sevillian skyline in *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977). Despite the bleak despair of the villagers, Buñuel and his crew still consider the trek through the mountains of Las Hurdes to be a beautiful (if daunting) adventure in *Land Without Bread* (1933).



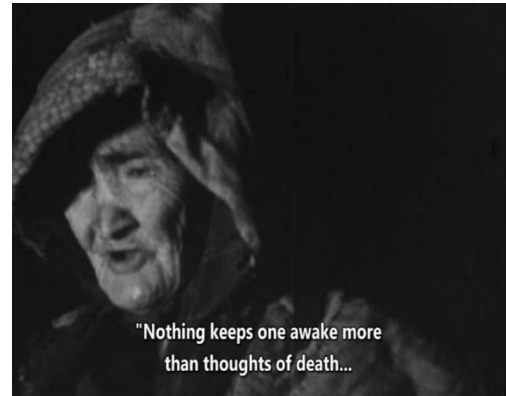
LIFE STAGES

Childhood In his searing documentary-like drama *The Young and the Damned* (1950), Buñuel presents a group of children (most of whom are tweens or teens) who are doomed to a life of delinquency, crime, and poverty. Pedro and his cohorts must either join the gang or find work in a shop or construction, and many of them are orphaned, abandoned, beaten, or molested (or a combination of all four). In essence, they are denied a childhood all together. There is a similar pallor of gloom over the starving children of Las Hurdes in *Land Without Bread* (1933). While the children in poverty suffer most overtly in Buñuel's Mexican dramas, the bourgeois or bourgeois-adjacent children of Buñuel's French films also contend with sexual predators and coming of



age challenges. Nearly every French-language Buñuel film includes a girl between the ages of 8-17 who, when not protected by one of the maternal female characters, becomes victimized by an older man. Claire is strangled in the forest in *Diary of a Chambermaid* (1964), and the 13-year-old Evalyn is raped (or, at the very least, inappropriately seduced) in *The Young One* (1960). María in *Diamond Hunters* (1956) and Cathy in *Belle de Jour* (1967) become sexual objects that men ogle. The children are often framed as innocents who will be marked by the violent or sexual fantasies of adults who pursue them.

Death Depending on the context of the film, Buñuel's characters either face and accept death or try to evade it. Often, death is brought about by violence or circumstance rather than old age, but the older characters succumb early or first. In *Exterminating Angel* (1962), some characters give into death, some fight back violently, and others try to use logic to reason out of their fate. Russell, one of the oldest guests, dies almost immediately. Similarly, Castin, the older father character in *Diamond Hunters* (1956), adopts an existentialist perspective and decides that everyone deserves to die in the jungle. The old Don Juans perform a sort of mid-life crisis in which they imagine themselves as young lovers, yet the majority of them die in their beds from illness or old age. The old woman at the end of *Land Without Bread* (1933) becomes the angel of death, wandering the streets and mourning the dead and dying. In many cases, Buñuel's characters must face their own mortality even if they are relatively young.



CHANGE

Repetition and Time Much of the humor in Buñuel's later films derives from the lack of change. The bourgeois characters remain stuck in an absurdist loop without a definitive beginning or end. The characters in the *Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972) are never allowed to eat, then are seemingly executed, then resurrected in the final shot of them walking down the country road. Mathieu never gets to sleep with Conchita in *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977), yet he keeps going back to her. The poor of Mexico City and Las Hurdes remain trapped in their state of abject poverty with no way out. In the case of Las Hurdes, their geographical isolation ensures not only poverty but a perpetual "medieval" existence. Even though most of the guests eventually escape the living room in *Exterminating Angel* (1962), their salvation comes in the form of repeating actions and dialogue from when the clock struck 3:00AM on the night of the party. The ability to "stop" time or rewind creates disorientation in the viewer and also creates the surrealist uncertainty in many films. In *Belle de Jour* (1967), there is the frequent emphasis on time, both with the chiming of the clock and Séverine's insistence that she must leave the brothel by 5:00 PM. Yet, this marking of time does not give a sense of continuity or linear movement to the viewer. We never quite know what is reality and what is a dream. This conflation of multiple possible realities is particularly confusing in *The Phantom of Liberty* (1974), which film critic Wendy Everett aptly describes as a "decoupage" of fragmented storylines. When there is a historical plot or reference at play, such as in *Simon of the Desert* (1965) and *The Milky Way* (1969), Buñuel distorts the timeline by first contextualizing a certain period, then suddenly incorporating ridiculous anachronisms (such as when the ascetic of the Dark Ages, Simón, is whisked away on a jet and visits a go-go dance club in 1960s New York City).

Transformation Despite the frequent stagnation or circular action in Buñuel's films, there are also moments when characters pass from one state to another. The young women often pass from a state of virginity or frigidity to sexual awakening. Conversely, some male characters who suffer from psychosis find a cure and are reformed, such as Francisco becoming a monk at the end of *This Strange Passion* (1953) or Archibaldo "throwing out" his homicidal tendencies with the cursed music box at the end of *Rehearsal of a Crime* (1955). In addition, Buñuel often uses the supernatural to conflate the states of the living and the dead, with the result that some characters seem to exist in both realms. The Man in *An Andalusian Dog* (1929) kills "himself," has a funeral, then transforms into a moth. The couple in *Exterminating Angel* (1962) conflate sex with death, and seem to disappear when they embrace their fate. Ghosts visit and interact with the living, and sometimes the living "play dead," such as when Viridiana and

Séverine become Sleeping Beauties in the male characters' necrophiliac fantasies. Along with the occasional suspension of death, Buñuel also leans into the grotesque by emphasizing biological transformation—in particular, rotting flesh and decomposition. The human characters confront their own mortality by seeing and smelling the results of death. Even when there is not rotting flesh, the frequent appearance of insects reminds the viewers of the cycle of life.

APPEARANCE

Deception Often, Buñuel's characters offer a straight-forward espousal of their desires and ideologies. The bourgeois men do little to hide their interests in sexual adventure or proclivities even to the point of flaunting their affairs and fetishes in front of their wives, lovers, and friends. In Buñuel's early surrealist films, he lays bare the sexual and violent tendencies of his characters. While the female characters are not as brazenly open as the men, some female characters do assert their ideologies, such as Viridiana's proclamation that she will remain a virgin, create a charity / refuge out of her uncle's estate, and eventually take her vows as a nun. Arguably the most deceptive female character in Buñuel's oeuvre is Séverine in *Belle de Jour* (1967) in that she hides her dissatisfaction and prostitution from her husband and "polite" society. She also refuses to tell her colleagues at brothel anything about her life in the hopes of maintaining a double life. Aside from the case of Séverine's secrets, Buñuel's psychopathic characters are those who lie and misdirect continually. Susana and Francisco pretend to be "normal" people who are looking for a partner, and they manage to hide their psychosis long enough to seduce and manipulate others. Archibaldo, the would-be murderer in *Rehearsal of a Crime* (1955), uses his charm and wealth to disarm his victims and make them more vulnerable to his violent fantasies.

Dreams A large part of the surrealist aesthetic relies upon creating an illogical dreamworld that expresses subconscious desire. This aspect of surrealism manifests itself most overtly in Buñuel's early Parisian films where there is little to no discernable plotline. In his later films, Buñuel folds characters' dreams into the seemingly linear movement of the plot, thereby mixing supposed reality with dreams, visions, or fantasies. While the viewer thinks she knows which sequences are Séverine's fantasies in *Belle de Jour* (1967), it is unclear by the film's end whether anything at all, including Séverine's foray into prostitution, actually occurred outside of her imagination. In other words, were her masochistic fantasies dreams within the larger dream of breaking out of her bourgeois ennui? A similar confusion is created in both *Exterminating Angel* (1962) and *Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972). Even though the members of the group (the opera swells at the party in *Angel* and the Parisian friends attempting to have dinner in *Discreet Charm*) experience the same (or at least, similar) perception of reality, the interference of individual visions and dreams disrupts continuity. In *Exterminating Angel*, some characters appear to die or disappear (or both), and several experience hallucinatory visions. The amount of time trapped in the living room is ambiguous. In *Discreet Charm*, several of the failed dinners are revealed to be dreams of one particular character. Even when all the characters are gunned down in the film's climax, they reappear walking down the road—and this suggests that their murder was also a dream.

CHARACTER TYPES

Conflicted Ingenues Usually, the female lead character in Buñuel's films starts off as a virginal, naïve, sweet, docile, young ingenue who is all too willing to accept a role as subservient daughter to the father-figure turned lover character. Once she becomes wife or lover to the domineering father figure (or when she realizes that the men will not stop sexually pursuing her), she becomes a rebellious vixen who experiments sexually with the younger male characters. Even the women who resist seduction or dominance, such as Viridiana in *Viridiana* (1961) or Celestine in *Diary of a Chambermaid* (1964), eventually succumb to the confines of the patriarchy. Many of the formally innocent and naïve protagonists cross over to the "dark side" in that they indulge in taboo sexual practices, vengeance, or even theft or murder.



Old Don Juan In some of Buñuel's films, the male husbands and lovers are neutral bourgeois characters who seem to be appropriate (if flawed) partners for their female counterparts. In other instances, particularly those films that are adaptations of Galdós's novels of nineteenth-century Spain (*Viridiana* and *Tristana*), the male lover-husband-guardian seduces or sexually coerces his young ward. The Old Don Juan (usually played by Spanish actor Fernando Rey) vacillates between paternal affection and dominance in his interactions with the young ingenue. With respect to the community at large, the old Don Juans are respected and rich oligarchs who dress well and maintain strong friendships. When the ingenues start to rebel against them and sleep with younger lovers, the old Don Juans descend into jealousy and obsession and lose their powerful conception of themselves. This loss of power is accompanied by a loss of physical prowess and death by old age.



Young Seducer In those films where the ingenue breaks free from her husband, she is often drawn to the cocky, talented, and brazen young man whom she meets outside of the domestic space. The young men engage the ingenues with their good looks and good love-making skills, but also present a danger to their lovers. The adulterous relationship either incites jealousy and obsession from the young man or from the female lead's husband, with the result that the film ends in a violent confrontation between men. In those cases when the young woman is not married, there are still young seducers who are both charming and dangerous. In the case of the silent films of the 1920s and 1930s, the young man is singularly obsessed with sexual penetration, although in the case of *Age of Gold* (1930), the Young Girl is equally driven to have sex. In the dramas and melodramas of the 1950s, the young seducers use their looks, talents, and charm to mask their psychopathic, violent, and sadistic fantasies.



Wise Servant Whereas the bourgeois characters often get lost in their worlds of repressed sexual desire, the servants to the families are able to look at the larger picture. Sometimes, the servants have intuition and common sense that their employers lack. It is hardly an accident that the cook and maids in *Exterminating Angel* (1962) manage to leave the apartment building and avoid being trapped. In *Susana* (1951), it is the indigenous maid Felisa who correctly identifies Susana's evil nature and urges the family to throw her out. The male butlers and valets often act as advisors and therapists to their bosses, in particular Pablo in *This Strange Passion* (1953), who plays nursemaid and psychologist when Francisco starts to turn obsession into paranoia. Another noteworthy example is the valet Martín in *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977), who helps Mathieu recover every time Conchita dumps him or wreaks havoc in his life.



Pedantic Priest Although many of the men of the cloth make an effort to lead a virtuous life and guide their flock, their approaches seem to be more focused on puffery than practicalities. In Buñuel's silent films, priests and monks appear at random moments and act as an obstacle to the protagonists' attempts to have sex. Several men of faith in *The Milky Way* (1969) preach at the pilgrims or other guests of the inn against their will. In one particularly funny scene, the priest at the inn yells a sermon about chastity and the Virgin Mary from the hallway while the pilgrim in the bedroom tries to seduce a female traveler. Other times, Buñuel exposes the priest as a hypocrite, such as when the gardener bishop in *Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972) ends up committing a revenge killing instead of giving last rites. Several priests offer their counsel or opinions without being asked, and sometimes, their opinions are proven to be wrong. The exemplar in this category is Father Velasco in *This Strange Passion* (1953) who not only defends Francisco's bad behavior but also admonishes the abused wife Gloria for not acting in a demure fashion.



Ineffective or Corrupt Military and Police Buñuel often skewers the military and the police for either not doing their jobs or facilitating injustice and torture. In *The Milky Way* (1969), the constables sent to the inn stop Jean and Pierre (who have just stolen a ham), but they immediately give up their interrogations. In *Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972), the ambassador Rafael, the foreign ministers, and the French gendarme are either running ineffectual drills or profiting from their positions. The police even torture a suspected terrorist near the end of the film. Buñuel also implies that the military and the police supported fascism in Spain, France, and Latin America. In addition, the director specifically calls out his Parisian nemesis who sabotaged the run of *The Age of Gold* (1930), Police Chief Chiappe.



Prophet or Saint Buñuel frequently presents his viewer with iterations of Jesus or Mary (including actual portrayals of Jesus and Mary in *The Milky Way*). Father Nazario in *Nazarín* (1959) and Simón in *Simon of the Desert* (1965) both sacrifice themselves to serve their communities and counsel others. In Nazario's case, the priest goes on a pilgrimage with his two "Mary Magdalenes", Beatriz and Ándara. Simón's penance atop a column often mimics Jesus's crucifixion, including the ascetic's stigmata-like injuries, his long-suffering mother gazing up at him, and his calls up to the sky. *The Milky Way* (1969) is replete with Biblical and Catholic references to prophets and saints—especially St. James, the patron saint of Spain, for whom the pilgrimage to Santiago was enacted over the centuries. There is also an occasional reference to the Mexican saint El Santo Niño de Atocha, who acts both as a manifestation of the child-age Jesus and as the patron saint for prisoners.



Beleaguered Mother In much of Buñuel's Mexican era, the director writes a young mother who is trapped in poverty or patriarchal oppression, or both. In the *Young and the Damned* (1950), Marta, Pedro's mother, must take care of three small children, the oldest of whom was a product of rape. She has neither the means nor the conviction to pull Pedro out of his gang life. In the *Daughter of Deceit* (1951), the adulterous young wife María is punished for her "deceit" by having her daughter ripped away from her and given to an unknown poor family. There is a similar desperation on the faces of the mothers in *Land Without Bread* (1933), who can do little to feed or protect their children in the isolated mountain hamlets. Even when the maternal characters enjoy more financial security, she must often protect her daughter from sexual predators, such as Pallas, who is always trying to shield her teenage daughter from the leering eyes of the johns who enter the brothel in *Belle de Jour* (1967).



Victimized Child or Teenager As indicated above, the single mothers and impoverished wives in Buñuel's early films often fail to protect their children from violence and sexual predation. When the family lives in abject poverty, be it in Mexico City or Las Hurdes, the children end up falling through the cracks of society's failures. Teenage girls in Buñuel's dramas experience sexual assault in any number of settings, from El Jaibo raping Meche in the barn in *The Young and the Damned* (1950) to Séverine's childhood flashback of possible molestation at the hands of a plumber in *Belle de Jour* (1967). If the children are unlucky enough to be orphans or abandoned, they are immediately victimized by adults who would enslave them or molest them (this is the grim pattern repeated over and over with nearly every character in *The Young and the Damned*).



Chimeric Dwarf On the one hand, Buñuel exoticizes little people by imbuing their characters with magical or wise auras. This portrayal might reference the Spanish custom of filling the Hapsburg courts with little people (as ladies in waiting, for example). On the other hand, the dwarf characters were played by dwarf actors (in the 1960s, this was usually Jesús Fernández), and some of the characters have breadth and depth. In the opening sequence of *The Milky Way* (1969), the pilgrims encounter two mysterious men. One, a dwarf, is often interpreted as the holy spirit. Although the other characters constantly belittle Fernández's dwarf character in *Nazarín* (1959), Buñuel manages to give him some dignity both as Ándara's suitor and as a savior to the dying migrants in one key scene. In *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977), it is the dwarf psychologist in the train berth who not only correctly diagnoses Mathieu but who is arguably the most distinguished and accomplished passenger on the train.



DIRECTOR'S FILMING STYLE AND TROPES

Thematic Storytelling Devices

Bestial Imagery / Symbolism Whether the setting be rural or urban, Buñuel's films nearly always include close-ups on insects and images of cows, chickens, and cats. Within the surreal world of his early silent films, animals constituted random and non-sensical imagery of a dream or nightmare. For the Mexican rural dramas and melodramas, animals helped create the world of the farm or ranch, and characters interacted with them as part of the business of the scene (especially chores such as milking cows and collecting eggs or honey). At times, such as in *Land Without Bread* (1933), the flora and fauna provided Buñuel and his fellow writers with the opportunity to give a lesson in science, entomology, or agronomy. These fields were Buñuel's area of expertise, so it is hardly surprising that he incorporated his own studies into the mise en scene and the script. In addition, animals often mirror the characters or reflect the themes of a particular film. Pedro in the *Young and the Damned* (1950) sees himself in the roosters who wander his slum neighborhood, and he lashes out against the chickens at the farm of the reform school. At the family ranch in *Susana* (1951), Don Guadalupe (the father) and his ranch hands struggle to tame and breed the rambunctious mare, which is an obvious metaphor for the inability to "tame" Susana. In *Viridiana* (1961), Don José offers a stick to rescue a drowning bee—a potential metaphor for the young novice's precarious position after leaving the convent. In at least two films (*Age of Gold* and *Young One*), the protagonists go out of their way to step on insects, which sets up the victimizer / victim dynamic between characters and the repressed and violent tendencies of the Id.



Allegory As discussed in the political sections above, Buñuel's films often offer subtle or overt critiques of capitalism and oppressive dictatorships throughout the twentieth century. In some cases, the conflicts among characters can be interpreted as an allegory for specific political conflicts. Some critics interpret the *Diamond Hunters* (1956) as an allegory for the Spanish Civil War in that the miners are brutally displaced by a general and his military. When the miners resist with violence, the military engages them in battle and executes them. The group who survives is forced to flee to the jungle, which could extend the allegory to Buñuel's exile. With respect to Buñuel's films set in Mexico, there is the repeated allegory of Mexico's origin story after the Conquest: la Malinche, the Aztec princess, interprets for and sleeps with Cortés, then marries him and bears the first mestizos of the New World. The veneration towards la Malinche as the mother of Mexico, combined with her characterization as raped and a traitor, are reflected in the family dynamics of such films as *The Young and the Damned* (1950). In Buñuel's later French period, the director references the plethora of dictatorships in Latin America and the scourge of the Vietnam War. *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972) is the exemplar of this combination of references. Miranda, the fictional South American country of the film, is a thinly-veiled reference to Argentina or Chile, both of which were rife with coups and right-wing dictatorships. In addition, the bishop, the ghost, and the young soldiers who interact with the diners all tell their tales of the horrors of war, and their descriptions parallel many of the atrocities and PTSD problems during and after Vietnam.

Intertext and Literary References Most of Buñuel's scripts in the 1950s and 1960s were adaptations of novels or stories, some of which were very well known in Europe. In some of Buñuel's scripts, the director and his co-authors specifically insert quotes or passages from well-known novels, stories, poems, and perhaps more overtly, from the Bible and other religious and philosophical texts. The most overt example of constant intertext is in *The Milky Way* (1969), in which multiple characters from multiple eras pontificate on scripture and Catholic dogmas. These



monologues, according to the film's postscript, are recitations of actual texts from prophets, monks, disciples, and philosophers. Despite his assertion that he only read entomological texts, Buñuel was famous for being extremely well read and a scholar of the Spanish literary canon. A fellow Spaniard would most likely recognize quotes and references to the medieval poet Jorge Manrique and the early twentieth-century essayists known as the Generation of '98 in the dialogue in *Exterminating Angel* (1962). (Buñuel is considered "adjacent" to the Generation of '27, of which his long-time friend and poet, Federico García Lorca, was part). Even when the characters do not explicitly quote literary or philosophical texts, Buñuel references certain styles, movements, and genres in the script and in the set design. Critics often comment on Buñuel's Gothic sensibility and his attraction to the macabre, which is compared to the Brontes and Edgar Allen Poe, among others. The ability to embrace the grotesque and the scatological is also a frequent trope in Spanish satirical and avant-garde literature going back to the picaresque novels of the Baroque period. Finally, Buñuel frequently incorporates fairy tale tropes as a means of enhancing uneasiness in the viewer.

Metaperformance and Metafilm Simply put, the "meta" in metafilm indicates a movie within a movie. This sort of overt metafilm is more a trope of Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar, whose plots often involve a film director shooting and editing his latest film. In the case of Buñuel, the references to the filmmaking process are more subtle and fall in the category of alienation effects—that is, using certain techniques to remind the viewer that she is watching a film rather than be carried away into the world of the film. Buñuel achieves this effect through jarring cuts or non-realistic camera angles, repeated dialogue or shots (this is most obvious in *Exterminating Angel*), random imagery (such as the dead donkeys on the piano in *An Andalusian Dog*), and sounds that do not correspond to the action of the scene.



All of these incongruencies prompt the viewer to ask: What was that about, or what does that have to do with this scene? The cherry on top of this metafilm sundae is Buñuel's decision to cast two actresses (who did not look alike and had completely different acting styles) for the role of Conchita in his final completed film, *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977). In addition to this sort of metafilm, Buñuel also frequently places types of performances within the film. The Sevillian sequences in *Obscure Object* show Conchita rehearsing, then performing her flamenco routine both as a tourist spectacle on stage and as a striptease for the private showroom upstairs. In *Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972), the characters enter a house in darkness, then suddenly find themselves in a dinner sequence on a theatre stage. The performance includes rubber chicken (props), a prompter in a prompter's box, stage lights, and perhaps most importantly, a full audience looking at them. There is also an overtly performative quality to Archibaldo's planned murders in *Rehearsal of a Crime* (1955). The theatrical quality of his homicides becomes especially pronounced when he "strangles" and incinerates a mannequin made to look exactly like one of his preferred victims.

Ambiguous Endings Buñuel often showed disdain towards the neatly packaged happy ending. In several of his Mexican melodramas, he does so, anyway, but with a subversive tone. For example, the family in *Susana* (1951) magically returns to their idyllic lives on the ranch despite the havoc that Susana wreaked, and Marta, the abandoned daughter in *The Daughter of Deceit* (1951), immediately forgives her father for giving her up when she was a baby. It is also unlikely that Archibaldo (in *Rehearsal of a Crime*) eschews his homicidal tendencies just because he threw out the cursed music box, but this action constitutes a supposed happy ending. With respect to the early surrealist films, the last shots offer yet another random image in a long sequence of random images. In the films with absurdist action or non-linear plot-lines, the ending scene often repeats the action of other moments in the film. Because the characters are stuck in a loop, the ending could just as easily be the beginning (the exemplar is the iconic shot of the characters walking down the country road several times in *Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*). There are also unreliable endings in that the viewer does not trust the central characters' perception of reality, especially when the sequence seems like a fantasy or a dream. In both *Belle de Jour* (1967) and *The Milky Way* (1969), the last shot is of vegetation on the ground after yet another odd interaction between the characters. In *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977), Conchita and Mathieu may or may not

have been blown up by a terrorist bomb attack. This ambiguity and subversive tone help to create Buñuel's avant-garde sensibility, especially in his later Parisian films.

Casting

Male Lead Actors Like many directors, Buñuel loved to cast the same people in similar types of roles.

Because he often wrote the script, the director would write certain parts with his favorite actors in mind. During his prolific production in Mexico City, Buñuel cast the famous actor Fernando Soler in multiple drawing-room dramas and melodramas, from playing the distraught drunk in *The Great Madcap* (1949) to the unmoored patriarchs in *The Daughter of Deceit* (1951) and *Susana* (1951).



Fernando Rey, the elder Spanish actor, played the 50-80 yr old Don Juan characters in almost all of Buñuel's films in the 1960s and 1970s—even those where the script was in French. When he needed a dashing matinee idol for the protagonist, Buñuel would hire George Marcal for French-speaking roles and Francisco Rabal for roles in Spanish. In typical subversive fashion, however, Buñuel continued casting both actors as they aged out of their matinee idol status, and often as a creepy or villainous character. Marcal played the necrophiliac Duke in *Belle de Jour* (1967), and Rabal played the morally-ambiguous son in *Viridiana* (1961) and the international drug dealer in *Belle de Jour* (1967). Perhaps Buñuel's most iconic actor was Michel Piccoli, who played key roles in nearly every French-language film that Buñuel produced. Like Catherine Deneuve (see below), Piccoli had an understated, stoic acting style that was perfect for either a bourgeois cad (his role in *Diary and Belle de Jour*) or a well-meaning member of the clergy (his role in *Diamond Hunters*).

Female Lead Actors Although Buñuel varied his leading ladies more than his leading men, he did rely on three blonde actresses to bring his visions to life. During the Mexican period, Buñuel cast the voluptuous and versatile Silvia Pinal in three key roles: as the conflicted title novice in *Viridiana* (1961), as the party guest who breaks the spell in *Exterminating Angel* (1962), and as various sexy incarnations of the devil in *Simon of the Desert* (1965). These varied roles allowed Pinal the opportunity to show her acting range. In contrast,



Buñuel's French leading ladies, especially Catherine Deneuve and Delphine Seyrig, played iterations of the same character in Buñuel's later films. Deneuve's icy beauty and almost blank expressions lent themselves to the portrayal of the lost ingenues in *Belle de Jour* (1967) and *Tristana* (1970)—both women who like the security of a traditional marriage but also long to break out and explore their sexuality. Seyrig provided saucy performances as the prostitute in *The Milky Way* (1969) and the adulterous Simone in *Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972).

Favorite Character Actors As discussed above, Buñuel frequently featured former leading men in juicy cameos, such as Piccoli's brief scene as the Marquis de Sade in *The Milky Way* (1969). In addition, he would use his favorite character actors as side-kicks or in bit parts. During his Mexican period, Buñuel cast the dwarf actor Jesús Fernández in numerous roles, most notably as Ándara's suitor in *Nazarín* (1959) and as the skeptical shepherd in *Simon of the Desert* (1965). Although his physicality dictated his roles to an extent, Buñuel also fleshed out his character so that the actor could dig into a role. For his later French films, Buñuel almost always cast



Julian Bertheau as a priest or waiter and the child-like actress Muni as a servant or assistant. Even with the smallest of parts, Muni used her unique delivery and wide eyes to bring attention to key moments in

the plot. Perhaps more than the leads, these character actors often enhanced the satirical, cheeky, or uncanny tone of Buñuel's *oeuvre*.

Shot Composition

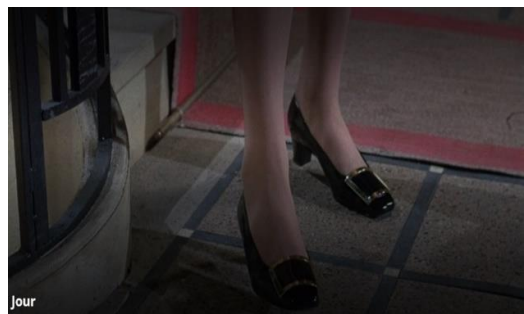
Wide-Shot Panoramas Especially in those films in which the characters are travelling, Buñuel and his cinematographers would set up an establishing shot overlooking the town, city, or estate. Often, the shots were more conventional and idyllic than what might be expected from Buñuel's subversive and grotesque tendencies. The vistas sometimes looked like a beautiful postcard, particularly in *The Milky Way* (1969) when the 1960s pilgrims Jean and Pierre cross the Pyrenees into San Sebastián and then finally arrive at Santiago de Compostela. The beautiful shots of the mountains in the mist in *Las Hurdes* is used in part to demonstrate the villagers' isolation, but Buñuel also juxtaposes the beauty of nature with the ugliness of poverty and desperation. One of Buñuel's favorite wide shots was that of a forest or a clearing in the forest. Often, the beauty of the forest in one scene belies the dark side of human nature lurking around the corner. In *Viridiana* (1961), the eponymous nun leads the rural vagabonds in an outdoor prayer, not realizing that they will loot the mansion and attempt to rape her a few days later. Séverine in *Belle de Jour* (1967) revels in the possibility of rape in the forest during her masochistic fantasies. In *An Andalusian Dog* (1929), the supposedly dead Man is carried in a funeral procession through the clearing in the woods, and in *Diary of a Chambermaid* (1964), the orphan Claire collects snails and berries in the woods, only to be raped and strangled minutes later.



High-Angle and Aerial Shots Sometimes, the high-angle and aerial shots are those picturesque panoramic shots described above. In addition, Buñuel employed extremely angled shots either to disorient the viewer or to visually contextualize the relationships between characters. Often, the bourgeois characters enjoy luxurious balconies with a view of their country estates or an apartment / hotel terrace overlooking the streets of Paris. The two films with a high number of high angle shots are *This Strange Passion* (1953) and *Simon of the Desert* (1965). In *This Strange Passion*, the protagonist Francisco literally looks down on his territory and on his fellow Mexicans. Early in the film, the viewer sees what Francisco owns through Francisco's eyes: his inherited lands in Guanajuato, and the dam construction projects in the mountains. Later, he climbs a tower with his wife Gloria, looks down at the townspeople below, calls himself their god, and considers throwing his wife off the tower. Francisco's literal and figurative perch underscores not only his sense of entitlement but also his descent into madness. In *Simon of the Desert*, the eponymous prophet decides to serve his faith and the villagers by standing on a column in the middle of the desert. Therefore, he must look down in order to communicate with the pilgrims and monks who visit him. In the film's climax, a commercial jet suddenly appears, and the viewer sees the skyscrapers of New York City from a skewed aerial view. This jarring change of scenery, period, and context immediately confuses the viewer. In both films, the high-angle shots point to the male protagonists' psyche and worldview.



Fetishistic Close-Ups For an in-depth analysis of fetishes employed throughout Buñuel's *oeuvre*, read the thematic section above on fetishism. Buñuel frequently fetishized women's feet and legs through close-ups on those body parts (and often "detached" from the woman's body in a particular frame). Feet and legs, rather than faces, tell the story of desire and eroticism. Even when it would be natural to offer a close-up on an actor's face to track their reactions or internal monologues, Buñuel



chooses instead to remain in a tight close-up on feet. An exemplar of this technique is the scene in *Belle de Jour* (1967) where Séverine has decided to become a prostitute and is climbing the stairs to the brothel. Buñuel also used close-ups on hands to create an uneasy feeling in the viewer. Male hands molest children, severed hands torment the subconscious, and the limp, hanging hand indicates death. Part of the viewer's discomfort is that we do not see the whole body or the whole person, and this fragmentation via close-up dehumanizes the camera's victims.

Soundtrack

Classical Music With respect to Buñuel's silent or (mostly silent) films of the 1920s and 30s, the surrealist images were accompanied by the same melodies repeated over and over. In *An Andalusian Dog* (1929), the same bars of a well-known tango play over and over, then there is a repeated theme from Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde*. In the case of *Age of Gold* (1930), the audience hears the climactic movement from Wagner's *Liebestod* over and over, especially when the young lovers are close to consummating their desire at the Marquis's ball. In the case of the quasi-documentary *Land Without Bread* (1933), Brahms's *Fourth Symphony* plays as inappropriately cheery transition music between locations. The music is particularly subversive given the horrible conditions of the villagers and the Narrator's assertion that the film crew never heard anyone singing the whole time they were in the region.

Incongruous Sound Effects The hyperbolically romantic and Romantic (the musical movement of the 1800s) classical music that accompanies Buñuel's mostly silent films already demonstrates his penchant for subversive soundtracks. In *An Andalusian Dog* (1929) and *Age of Gold* (1930), the relationship between the unnamed lovers is sexual, sadistic, and erotic—not romantic. The disease and starvation among the Hurdanos (the inhabitants of this particular province in Spain) hardly needs a musical soundtrack. In addition to this inappropriate use of music, Buñuel also used particular noises that disrupted the trajectory of the scene. Sometimes, the sound effects made sense but were too loud or continuous, such as the cow bell ringing for several minutes in *Age of Gold* (1930) or the superfluous chiming of the clock in *Belle de Jour* (1967). At other times, the volume of the sound effect completely obscures the dialogue, most notably in the bureaucratic and military monologues in *Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972). In still other instances, the sound effects are recognizable but have no referent in the scene—such as hearing a cat meowing where no cat is seen. All of these effects serve to interrupt the flow of the film and create a sense of disorientation or annoyance in the viewer, which is a key trait in most avant-garde movements of the 1920s and 1930s in Europe.

Editing

Abrupt Cuts and Lack of Continuity Buñuel was known for his lack of transitions between scenes and settings. In the surrealist films, one image appears after another with no context beyond an illogical sentence on a title card. At times, Buñuel used dissolves in the silent films, but this rarely assisted in contextualizing the nightmarish images. In later films, Buñuel does not always indicate a change in place or time—that is, there is a scene in one period with one set of characters, then a new scene without context or transition (unlike in classic films such as *The Wizard of Oz*, where the tornado and the change to color film make the separation between the two worlds crystal clear). The lack of distinction between worlds, settings and periods becomes even more confusing (and arguably, effective) in *The Milky Way* (1969), where many, many different characters from the year 100 BCE to 1965 pontificate on Christian doctrine, and Buñuel does not even put the historical moments in chronological order. In some films, Buñuel cuts a sequence so that the film skips ahead a few seconds, as if a rat chewed up a square of film. This effect is seen at the end of *Diary of a Chambermaid* (1967), where the right-wing protest suddenly moves several blocks up the street in a series of spasmodic cuts. Some critics also point to Buñuel's use of jump cuts, which indicates an abrupt point of view change in a single scene. This style of editing was popular in the 1960s with both the French New Wave and Italian Neorealist directors.

Elements of Production

Props While costumes and set designs helped to create the worlds of Buñuel's films, his unique style was created more with unique writing, unconventional editing (see above), and carefully composed shots of outdoor locations. I argue that Buñuel's use of props and accessories were the most important aspects of the visual sign systems in his films. Occasionally, a costume held symbolic or subversive power, such as when the Man in *An Andalusian Dog* (1929) wears a nun's habit or when the devil tempts Simon in a cheeky schoolgirl uniform in *Simon of the Desert* (1965). However, the objects that



the characters hold can acquire the most significance. In *An Andalusian Dog* (1929), the striped handbag is passed around from character to character, and Buñuel offers multiple close-ups of the keyhole on the outside of the purse. The unusual focus on the handbag establishes the fetishistic reference to the vagina that repeats throughout the film. In later films, Buñuel referenced the vagina through the imagery of sewing and embroidery, which could indicate inaccessibility or the desire for penetration (such as when Mathieu stares at the needle moving in and out of the white lace in *That Obscure Object of Desire* of 1977). The most ubiquitous fetishized prop in Buñuel's oeuvre is that of a pistol or rifle. The director almost always wrote in a scene where one or more of the male leads arranges, polishes, or shoots his firearms. Part of this trope has to do with Buñuel's interest in firearms and hunting generally, but the director takes the framing and emphasis on firearms to an absurd level. The men have a phallic obsession with their guns, which helps the viewer understand their sexual proclivities and psychosis. In addition to enhancing fetishization and symbolism, props gave the viewer important information about the character. The characters in *Diamond Hunters* (1956) handle, put on, and look at diamonds and jewelry throughout the film, thereby underscoring the greed of the town and the motivations and ambitions of the characters. Several male characters wield canes, which, along with the obvious phallic connotation, signals wealth, danger, and in the case of the aging Don Juans played by Fernando Rey, disability. Marcel's excessively long cane in *Belle de Jour* (1967) denotes power and violence—he uses it both as a weapon and as an affection. When the prop is a prosthetic, as in *Tristana* (1970), or a mannequin, as in *Rehearsal of a Crime* (1955), it becomes an avatar of the character to whom it is attached, and this uncanny effect increases the suspense in both films.