

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Land Without Bread / Las Hurdes: Tierra sin pan (1933) 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*. However, Buñuel did not limit himself to the overt avant-garde style of his first films, but also experimented with documentaries, melodramas, and thrillers. The subject of this essay, *Land Without Bread*, is a short film that bridges several genres and styles: it is part documentary, part travelogue, part drama, part parody-satire, and part collection of surrealist images. 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. 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 *Land Without Bread* (1933) is a short black and white film set and filmed in the isolated villages of Las Hurdes, a region in the Spanish province of Extremadura. The film is adapted partially from a "human geographical" study of the region written by Maurice Legendre in 1927. Because of its shots of the real inhabitants of Las Hurdes (including the animals), *Land Without Bread* is often characterized as a documentary short. However, the director did orchestrate certain scenes, including the death of the donkey on the mountain trail. Moreover, the narration frequently deviates from an explanation of what is in the frame at any given moment in favor of judging, empathizing with, or lying about the film's subjects (see CHARACTER ANALYSIS below). Buñuel worked with his friend and producer Ramón Acín to fund the trip to the impoverished province. The director wrote a narration with several co-writers to contextualize the gritty footage that cinematographer Eli Lotar captured. Although the film debuted in the Palacio de la Prensa Cinema in Madrid, the shocking portrayal of poverty in rural Spain offended state officials. As a result, the film was banned from 1933-1936.

Background After his successful and controversial foray into the Parisian film industry, Buñuel briefly returned to his homeland and looked for a new project. This film came about because one of Buñuel's friends, Ramón Acín, won a lottery ticket and promised to produce Buñuel's next film idea. The challenges of filming in a remote location in the mountains is the subject of a recent animated film entitled *Buñuel in the Labyrinth of the Turtles* (2018) (which is available to view for free on Kanopy). At the time of the debut of *Land Without Bread*, the Spanish government was known as Second Republic (1931-1939), a conglomeration of left-leaning political groups who deposed King Alfonso XIII and tried to forge a democratic system under a new constitution. The Second Republic was in response to the dictatorship of Miguel Primo de Rivera (1923-1930). However, dissension among the Republicans contributed to the weakening of the Republic and the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936. The civil war and subsequent dictatorship (1939-1975) incited many artists and activists to flee Spain, and Buñuel himself live in exile for most of his life. In fact, *Land Without Bread* presages one of Buñuel's most impactful films of his exile in Mexico City: *Los olvidados*, or *The Young and the Damned* (1950). In this later film, Buñuel depicts the misery of juvenile delinquents in the slum neighborhoods of Mexico City. Both films underscore the destructive effects of generational poverty on society.

CHARACTERS

<i>Narrator</i>	The voiceover who explains and interprets
<i>The Bachelors</i>	The young men of La Alberca who kill the roosters
<i>Schoolchildren</i>	The barefoot boys and girls in the classroom
<i>Woman with Goiter</i>	The mother who has an untreated goiter
<i>Dying Girl</i>	The girl who dies of an infected throat and fever
<i>Dying Donkey</i>	The white donkey who is attacked by bees
<i>Falling Goat</i>	The mountain goat that falls to its death
<i>Old Woman</i>	The woman who wanders the streets at night

SYNOPSIS

Buñuel, producer Ramón Acín, and cinematographer Elí Kotar travel to Las Hurdes, a mountainous, isolated region in northwest Spain. They travel through several mountainous villages, including the bigger and more prosperous La Alberca, the towns in the valley of Las Batuecas, and a miserable hovel call Martilandrán. At each stop, they film villagers at home, walking in the streets, and working in the fields. The details of their daily lives and challenges are described in a constant narration. The Narrator also offers frequent sociopolitical, opinionated, or emotionally-charged commentary throughout the film.

The film focuses largely on poverty, struggle, and disease—in particular, malaria, infections, and fevers. Along with starvation, the villagers must contend with birth defects, accidents, animal attacks, and the inability to find work in Extremadura. The film presents several children who are dying or who have died, including a young girl collapsed by the side of the road.

In addition to capturing the miserable conditions of the mountain peasants, the filmmakers also film and describe rituals and practices of particular areas. For example, the inhabitants of La Alberca hold a festival in which eligible men ride horses in costume and pull the heads off of roosters. The people of Martilandrán build shell-like roofs and lay dried strawberry leaves on their floors. In the final sequences of the film, the viewer sees a funeral procession in which the villagers march long distances to a cemetery alongside a church.

At the end of the film, there is a textual commentary in which the filmmakers exhort the Spanish government to help the poor people of Spain. They also align themselves politically with the Popular Front and denounce General Francisco Franco (the head of the nationalist movement) as a fascist.

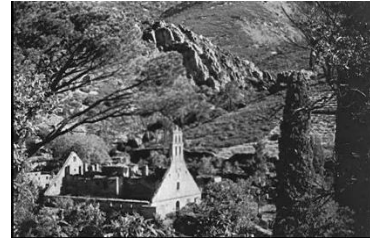
SCENES

Opening Credits and Narration The credits roll in white on a black background without images. Music from Brahms's *Fourth Symphony* plays. A text appears explaining that Las Hurdes is an inhospitable and barren region that was founded shortly after the Spanish Republic in 1932. The text also explains how the region is isolated and relatively unknown to the outside world due to a lack of accessible roads until 1922.

Map with Narration A map of Spain appears with an outline of the province of Las Hurdes in central Spain. The narration explains that the region is not far from Salamanca. The already judgmental Narrator goes on to assert that but unlike that rich and historical city, Las Hurdes suffers from a “primitive and medieval culture.” The Narrator explains that the “we” (the filmmakers) passed through the village of La Alberca because it is the easiest point of entry to the Las Hurdes region as a whole. The Narrator asserts that although La Alberca is feudal in character, all of the inhabitants of Las Hurdes depend upon it. During the last lines of narration, the camera cuts to aerial shots of the narrow, cobbled streets of La Alberca.



Architecture and Culture of La Alberca The Narrator describes the architecture of La Alberca, starting with the church and the homes. The church has two niches on either side of the door with two skulls “watching over” the inhabitants. The houses have three stories, which is a design somewhat foreign to Spanish style. There is a religious inscription engraved on the lintel above each home’s door—often a dedication to the Virgin Mary. The structure of the town, explains the Narrator, is quite medieval.



Preparing for a Festival The camera cuts to two women who are dressed in festival costumes and are fixing each other’s hair. The Narrator explains that they asked the women why they were dressed up, and they suggested that the filmmakers walk to the plaza surrounding the church.

Barbaric Ritual The Narrator explains that the town’s bachelors engage in a violent ritual in which they tear off the head of a live rooster as it hangs upside down. The camera cuts to a shot of a rooster with dark feathers dangling from a rope and struggling. The camera cuts to a wide shot of the rope stretched across the main street of the town and the rooster hanging (with its legs tied) in the center of the rope. The Narrator explains that each bachelor rides a horse and attempts to pull off the rooster’s head as they pass under the rope. Once one rooster is dead, they tie up another one until each bachelor has succeeded in decapitating a rooster. The camera shows a series of “runs” with the men riding horses, then cuts to a close-up of another rooster, now white, dangling from the rope. The Narrator comments that there is surely some “sexual” meaning attached to this violent act, but he declares that he won’t delve into that “right now.”



Aftermath of the Bloody Ritual Once the men have succeeded tearing off the heads of roosters, they pour red wine into cups for the villagers to drink. The Narrator comments that the town enjoys multiple pleasures from eating and drinking together. He also points to another ritual in which a small child is adorned with silver medallions. The Narrator describes the medals as having Christian iconography even though they appear like those of the “savage” cultures of Africa and Oceania. At 7:00 PM, the filmmakers leave La Alberca and head out to the mountains three kilometers outside of the town.



Location of Las Hurdes The camera cuts to an aerial shot of the mountains surrounding the villages of Las Hurdes. The Narrator explains that there are 52 small villages in the region with only 8,000 inhabitants. One particular village requires that the filmmakers descend into a beautiful valley called Las Batuecas. The camera cuts to a monastery and the narrator explains that a monk lives there among a handful of villages. There is a close-up on a teenage girl’s face and her head in a white scarf.



Toads in the Ruins The Narrator explains that there is an ancient convent in the valley along with several caves. The ecology of the valley includes several amphibians and over 200 species of trees. The camera cuts to close-up shots of toads hopping on the ground and a nearby forest. The narrator explains that there are several hermitages in the high hills with surrounding walls, and the monks would communicate with each other through the ringing of the bells.



Beyond Las Batuecas The camera cuts to the barren hills of Las Hurdes beyond the lush valley of Las Batuecas. The Narrator notes that the white building on a hill is the recently built school. The camera cuts to a steep road with an old woman climbing the hill. There are also two boys: one walking behind a pig, and another riding a donkey. The Narrator mentions that the filmmakers never heard a single song the whole time they were in the village.



Drinking from the Dirty Stream The Narrator mentions that there is tiny "miserable" stream that runs through the village, and it is the only source of water during the summer. There are a series of images of children and animals drinking from the stream, including a young girl who holds her baby brother and scoops up water for him to drink out of her hand. There are also shots of women washing clothes and children with the water from the stream, as well as young girls dipping pieces of bread in the water. The Narrator explains that the schoolmaster doles out bread to the children and watches them eat it for fear that their parents will take it from them. The Narrator also asserts that no bread existed in the village until recently.



Teaching the Impoverished Children The girls file into the school with the boys. The Narrator explains that the children are barefoot and wear ill-fitting clothes that are sold to the town by beggar merchants every year. The government provides 15 pesetas a month to raise a family. The Narrator remarks that even though the children are starving, they still receive a public education. The filmmakers watch / partially conduct a lesson involving morals. One of the students writes the aphorism "Respect the belongings of others" on the chalkboard.



Entering the Village of Martilandrán The camera cuts to another valley with cherry, walnut, and olive trees. There is an aerial shot of triangular roofs that according to the Narrator, look like the shell of an animal "out of a fable". The narrator bemoans the especially bad poverty and misery of Martilandrán, including but not limited to constant coughing and sickness. There are several shots of bedraggled children walking with their mothers, as well as a woman with a huge goiter on her neck.



Tragedy of the Dying Girl The filmmakers come across a sick girl lying in the street. The mayor says that she has been immobile for three days and they cannot discern the cause. One of the filmmakers examines her, and there is a close-up of her open mouth. The Narrator reports that her gums and throat were very inflamed. When the filmmakers asked after her two days later, they found out that she had died.



Animals as Sustenance The camera cuts to a shot of an older woman peeling potatoes in a doorway while a small pig walks in and out. The Narrator explains that only the "rich" families in the village can afford a pig, which they slaughter every year for a few days of meat. The villagers mostly live on potatoes and beans. The camera cuts to the cliffs above the village where two mountain goats are climbing. The Narrator explains that goats are some of the few animals that can survive the barren landscape. Suddenly, one of the goats loses its footing and plummets to its death. The camera follows the descent of the goat as it falls, rolls, and hits the jagged edges of the cliffs.



The Perils of Beekeeping The Narrator explains that the Hurdanos (the term for residents of Las Hurdes) tend beehives and depend on honey for survival. The hives belong to the Albercans, but the Hurdanos take care of the hives during the winter and cart them to Castile. The camera shows men guiding laden donkeys up a steep hill. The Narrator explains that the beasts carry the hives. There is a quick cut to a white donkey kicking as it is stung by bees. The Narrator explains that the donkey was tied up and then knocked over some of the hives. He goes on to say that the Hurdanos called them over for help, but the donkey was already being attacked by multiple swarms of bees. The camera cuts to a close-up of the dead donkey's face with clumps of bees on it. The Narrator reports that many donkeys and men have been killed by bee stings en route to Salamanca.



Summer Starvation The camera cuts to an older woman picking green cherries off of a branch. The Narrator explains that the village starts to starve in May due to a lack of potatoes. As a result, the men who are healthy go on foot to other areas in Extremadura (the Spanish province in the west) to find work. However, they do not have sufficient supplies for the trip. The Narrator comments that several groups of men leave and return without food or money.



Agricultural Techniques The Narrator describes how the Hurdanos tend the land in this region. First, they pick a plot near the river. As a group, they use rudimentary picks to clear the brush. Then, they build a stone wall to prevent flooding. Finally, they transport fertile soil from the mountains down to their plot. The Narrator explains that this technique works for one season, yet the soil is depleted of nutrients afterwards. As a result, the Hurdanos keep clearing the land along the river. There is an aerial shot of the terraced strips of tilled soil along the river.

Perilous Migration The camera cuts to a shot of a family hiking up a steep, rocky, hill. The Narrator explains that agriculture cannot sustain a typical family, so they have to move around to find work. As they walk, they collect strawberry leaves that can be used to make shoes. However, they are frequently bit by vipers on the ground. The camera closes in on the swollen fingers of a man who was bit, and the narrator explains that a bite can become fatal if the victim gets a bad infection.



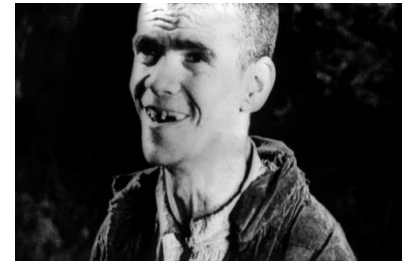
Interior of the Houses The Narrator explains that the strawberry leaves also serve as bedding for the floor and as fertilizer after they decompose. The camera cuts to a man dumping a sack of leaves on the floor. The camera then cuts to a woman and two children sitting next to a bowl. The Narrator reports that this scene is a typical interior of a house in this village. The mother starts to cook, and the smoke pours out of the doors. The Narrator explains that the smoke has nowhere to escape, given that these shacks have no chimneys or windows.



Scourge of Malaria The camera shows an aerial shot of a dry river bed. The Narrator describes how the summer brings malaria due to dryness and the plethora of mosquitos. There is a shot of diagrams of two different species of mosquitos: the Anopheles, which carries malaria, and another species which is less harmful. The Narrator explains that the Anopheles is prevalent in Las Hurdes and can be recognized by how it lands on the wall at a perpendicular angle. The camera cuts to a man shaking and shivering uncontrollably. The Narrator says that these are the symptoms of a malarial fever. There are several other shots of sick villagers lying in the streets or in bed.



Dwarf Shepherds The Narrator explains that due to extreme poverty and incest, there is a high percentage of dwarves and mentally disabled children in Las Hurdes. The dwarves often climb up the mountain to tend the goats during the day. The Narrator maintains that it was difficult to film the dwarves, and even more so with the small “cretins”. The camera cuts to the smiling face of a supposedly mentally disabled boy, who would only agree to be filmed while one of his friends distracted him.



Dead Baby The camera cuts to a shot of a group of adult Hurdanos standing outside the threshold of one of the shacks. The Narrator reports that a child has died. The camera cuts to a shot of a still baby with flies on its face, then there is a close-up of the stoic mother. The father carries the dead baby up the mountain and is followed by a procession of villagers. They pass the body in a cradle across the river. The procession finally arrives at a field which acts as the cemetery. The graves are marked by crosses and pieces of wood laying on the grave itself. The camera cuts to a church altar, and the narrator comments that there are still churches—even in the most impoverished areas.



A Night at Home The camera cuts to another interior of a house of a young family. They all sit around the hearth, then they fall asleep in one bed, all together. The Narrator notes that the Hurdanos wear their clothes to bed and keep their clothes on until they fall off in rags. As the family sleeps, an old woman roams the streets at night. She chants prayers for the dead and swings what appears to be a homemade thurible. She proclaims that thinking of death keeps one up at night.



Last Shot of the Mountains and Aggressive Political Message The camera cuts to another panoramic shot of the mountains in the morning light. The Narrator says that the filmmakers stayed for two months before leaving. A title card with text appears in which the filmmakers argue that the miserable poverty of the Hurdanos is not a foregone conclusion. The text suggests that with community unity and better social and governmental services, the Hurdanos could improve their living conditions. The filmmakers criticize fascist policies, including those of Franco and Mussolini, and they declare that the Popular Front who fights against Franco will promote a better life for the peasants of Spain.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

THE NARRATOR

The Narrator both describes the scene and comments on the misery at hand. Despite the film’s documentary feel, the Narrator frequently imposes his own opinion rather than simply reporting on the scene. In an early version of the film, Buñuel himself recorded the voice of the narration.

Sympathetic The Narrator makes a point to describe the victimization of the Hurdanos, and he also acknowledges the lack of solutions at their disposal. For example, the film details the peasants' farming techniques but then admits that the low yield cannot sustain the village throughout the whole year. There is a similar tone towards the suffering children, especially when the filmmakers themselves intervene (as is the case with trying to diagnose and treat the girl dying in the street).

Methodical At times, the sympathetic tone towards the villagers is set aside in order to analyze a process scientifically. The Narrator offers a lecture on certain geographical or ecological traits of the province, such as the unique features of a particular species of mosquito that spreads malaria. The Narrator uses charts, graphs, and maps for their cinematic lessons.

Subjective Unlike a traditional documentary, the Narrator often deviates from an objective description of what is in the frame. For example, the shot of the untidy graves at the end of the funeral procession contradicts the Narrator's assertion that the villagers tend faithfully to their cemetery. There is the frequent commentary that is not always relevant to the scene at hand, such as the Narrator's musing as to whether the beheading of roosters in La Alberca has a psychosexual component, or when the narrator calls the mentally disabled shepherds "freaks of nature." These deviations from the scene at hand, deceptive interpretations of events, and disdainful attitudes towards the film's subjects suggest that the Narrator cannot be trusted to report the facts.

THE SCHOOLCHILDREN

As the adopted orphans of the town, the schoolchildren range from toddlers to pre-teens who take classes in the one-roomed schoolhouse. They are all emaciated, wear torn clothing, and lack shoes. According to the narration, they are the only Hurdanos who eat bread (which is subsidized by the Spanish government).

Weary Due to their extreme poverty, the children lack energy and the concentration to learn. The lack of food ages them prematurely and gives them the aspect of fatigue. There are several close-ups of the children sitting quietly and barely able to move during the lesson.

Yearning While the children seemed preoccupied with survival, they also crave attention and affection. The student who is chosen to write on the board seems eager to be the model student. In the animated film about the making of *Land Without Bread*, Buñuel in *the Labyrinth of the Turtles*, the filmmakers pick up and hug a couple of students during the classroom scene. The children crave contact so much that they all ask to be picked up.

THEMES

SOCIETY

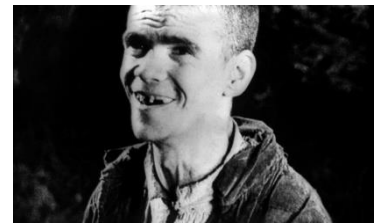
Poverty Unlike other Buñuel films, the focus is not on the bourgeoisie and their servants, but rather on the poorest of the poor in these culturally specific, mountainous rural areas. The poverty of the villagers manifests itself in various forms. The inhabitants can only grow certain crops, and the land is only fertile for one season. The yield of the crops cannot sustain the families through the year; then, the men cannot find supplementary work during the summer. Only a few families raise pigs, and the meat does not sustain them, either. The poverty also extends to poor living conditions: no clean water, few beds, no windows, no barns, and no chimneys. The quasi-documentary style of the film allows the filmmakers to highlight the miserable ripple effects of poverty: starvation, disease, birth defects, hopelessness, and premature death. The narration frequently describes the culture of Las Hurdes as medieval, yet even they do not have the hierarchy of a feudal system. Aside from monks, there is one economic class: the abject poor. The isolation of the village and the relatively barren landscape suggest that not even oligarchs have been able to infiltrate the area.

Illustrative Moment: Drinking from the Dirty Stream The Narrator mentions that there is tiny “miserable” stream that runs through the village, and it is the only source of water during the summer. There are a series of images of children and animals drinking from the stream, including a young girl who holds her baby brother and scoops up water for him to drink out of her hand. There are also shots of women washing clothes and children with the water from the stream, as well as young girls dipping pieces of bread in the water. The Narrator explains that the schoolmaster doles out bread to the children and watches them eat it for fear that their parents will take it from them. The Narrator also asserts that no bread existed in the village until recently. Along with alluding to the title of the film, this village scene encapsulates the lifestyle and peril of the rural villages: the lack of subsistence, the mass contamination, and the general lack of options for the inhabitants of the region.



Disability and Illness As with many of Buñuel’s films, there are several featured disabilities and illnesses throughout *Land Without Bread*. Unlike other films, however, Buñuel is not creating a character interpreted by a disabled actor. Rather, the people with disabilities are members of the community of Las Hurdes. Near the end of the film, the filmmakers managed to converse with dwarf shepherds and mentally disabled boys. The narration asserts that these outcasts are the result of incest and poor nutrition. Along with frequent birth defects, there are constant plagues that break out in the village communities. The inhabitants suffer from untreated infections, dysentery, and constant waves of malaria. The Narrator implies that many of the ailments are due to the communal use of contaminated water. Once again, the villagers’ problems all begin and end with abject poverty.

Illustrative Moment: Dwarf Shepherds The Narrator explains that due to extreme poverty and incest, there is a high percentage of dwarves and mentally disabled children in Las Hurdes. The dwarves often climb up the mountain to tend the goats during the day. The Narrator maintains that it was difficult to film the dwarves, and even more so with the small “cretins”. The camera cuts to the smiling face of a supposedly mentally disabled boy, who would only agree to be filmed while one of his friends distracted him. Along with offering case studies of disabled children, this scene also indicates that the disabled Hurdanos are even more marginalized and isolated than the villagers themselves. This double marginalization provides further proof of the need for reform.



Isolation The geography of this particular region of Spain becomes a theme within the documentary. The film begins and ends with majestic shots of the mountains and a description of the difficulties the filmmakers encountered when entering the mountain hamlets. The region is not just rural but isolated and removed from the rest of Spanish society. While the placement of the villages immediately creates logistical problems (much like those of the communities in and around the Appalachians in the U.S.), this geographical isolation is compounded by societal neglect. The villagers live in an almost feudal existence without a lord. They remain starving farmers who try to eek out an existence alongside the medieval monasteries in the mountains. Apart from the paltry subsidies afforded to the school for orphans, the Spanish government largely ignores these communities.

Illustrative Moment: Map with Narration A map of Spain appears with an outline of the province of Las Hurdes in central Spain. The subjective narration explains that the region is not far from Salamanca, but unlike that rich and historical city, Las Hurdes suffers from a primitive and medieval culture. This exposition scene literally gives the lay of the land, but it also serves to prime the viewer for the intense rurality and isolation of Las Hurdes. The narration juxtaposes the intellectual culture of Salamanca (the closest city) to the medieval austerity of the towns in the mountains. The narration also underscores the difficulty in entering the province due to its largely inaccessible and isolated location.



Science Although the crux of the film is the suffering of the Hurdanos and a description of their particular culture, there is also an analysis of the geography and ecology of the area. Buñuel begins the film with a map of Spain and an explanation of Las Hurdes's exact location as if the viewer were a grade school student listening to a lecture. The narration frequently departs from the state of the village in order to classify the species of trees and animals found in the plains and forests surrounding the hamlets. Sometimes the environmental study is meant to elucidate the dangers or benefits of the flora and fauna to the human residents, such as the importance of the cherry trees for food or the strawberry leaves for bedding. Despite several moments of empathy throughout the film, some critics characterize the narrative voice as distanced from the misery of the film's subjects, almost as if the Hurdanos were another species of animals under the microscope.



Illustrative Moment: Scourge of Malaria The camera shows an aerial shot of a dry river bed. The Narrator describes how the summer brings malaria due to dryness and the plethora of mosquitos. There is a shot of diagrams of two different species of mosquitos: the Anopheles, which carries malaria, and another species which is less harmful. The Narrator explains that the Anopheles is prevalent in Las Hurdes and can be recognized by how it lands on the wall at a perpendicular angle. The camera cuts to a man shaking and shivering uncontrollably. The Narrator says that these are the symptoms of a malarial fever. There are several other shots of sick villagers lying in the streets or in bed. Although the film returns to the plight of the human villagers after a few minutes, this foray into entymology and virology seems as though the filmmakers are giving a scientific lecture within the documentary. It is likely that Buñuel's predilection for insects influenced this scene, as the analysis of the species of mosquitos lasts for several minutes.

JUSTICE

Violence While the drumbeat of the film is the slow torture of poverty, Buñuel also accentuates the misery with sudden bursts of violence. In particular, the viewer sees animals suddenly dying by violent means: the donkey succumbing to too many bee stings, or the mountain goat falling to its death. Nature itself becomes a violent victimizer that threatens the life of the people of Las Hurdes, who cannot defend themselves for lack of education and means. Buñuel also uses the focus on animals to create his signature grotesque moments of surrealism. The viewer sees the bees attacking the donkey and then, the rotting head moments later (and this scene was orchestrated rather than captured in the moment). The residents must suffer stings of the viper and malaria infections of the mosquito, and they do not have the benefit of treatment. The ritual in La Alberca speaks to a violence perpetrated by the villagers themselves. In this case, the men are beheading the live roosters as a show of masculine force. This violence is perpetrated as part of a human ritual, and the implication is that the ritual is more savage than predation in nature.

Illustrative Moment: The Perils of Beekeeping The Narrator explains that the Hurdanos tend beehives and depend on selling honey for survival. The camera shows men guiding laden donkeys up a steep hill. The Narrator explains that the beasts carry the hives. There is a quick cut to a white donkey kicking as it is stung by bees. The Narrator describes how the donkey was tied up and knocked over some of the hives. The camera cuts to a close-up of the dead donkey's face with clumps of bees on it. The Narrator reports that many donkeys and men have been killed by bee stings en route to Salamanca. In this scene, the viewer realizes that death and violence are the necessary evils for survival in Las Hurdes. The bees produce one of the few products that can sustains the Hurdanos economically, yet the yield requires that the men and their beasts of burden risk death.



POLITICS

Socialism As a young communist, Buñuel naturally attributed the miserable state of his fellow Spaniards to the failed policies of oligarchic Spain in the nineteenth century, the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera in the 1920s, and the increasingly popular rhetoric of European fascists in the 1930s. In fact, the

textual commentary at the end of the film explicitly names Franco and compares him to other fascists such as Mussolini. The commentary also implies that a socialist government would address poverty through government assistance. The producer of *Land Without Bread*, Ramón Acín, was an ardent anarchist, and his attitudes towards the Second Republic likely also influenced the tone of the film and the explicit political criticism of the text in the film's epilogue. On the other hand, Buñuel was infamous for his resistance towards embracing a specific ideology, and therefore, the central thesis of the epilogue does not necessarily represent Buñuel's personal opinion. According to film critic Ted Nannicelli, the left-wing rhetoric of the epilogue may constitute a satirical or subversive discourse that parodies the pedantic messages of documentaries. In this reading of the film, Buñuel does not believe that governmental intervention will actually lead to a better lifestyle for the Hurdanos.

Spanish Civil War The sociopolitical commentary throughout *Land Without Bread* not only critiques the Spanish government of 1933 (the Second Republic), but also presages the violence between the pro-Franco nationalists and the socialist Republicans during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). Although the Republicans were in power in the 1930s, the chaos and dissension among various factions of Republicans created a weak and inefficient system. The result was a reactionary nationalism that would lead to the 40-year dictatorship of Francisco Franco. Although the war had not yet begun at the time of the film's debut, it is clear that the filmmakers saw the division among Spaniards and knew that Franco was a formidable force aligned with the other fascist dictators in Europe. Moreover, the filmmakers were already preparing for a potential life in exile. After their stay in Las Hurdes, Buñuel would not return to his homeland until the late 1960s.

Illustrative Moment: Aggressive Political Message An epilogue with text appears declaring that the miserable poverty of the Hurdanos is not a foregone conclusion. The text suggests that with community unity and better social and governmental services, the living conditions in the region could improve. The filmmakers criticize fascist policies, including those of Franco and Mussolini, and they declare that the Popular Front who fights against Franco will promote a better life for the peasants of Spain. The first half of the text exhorts the government to invest in social domestic programs and lift the Hurdanos out of their abject poverty—which are two potential points of the Socialist platform of the Second Republic in the 1930s. The added criticism of Franco underscores the polarization between the two political factions in Spain, which will explode into a civil war shortly after the film's debut.

RELATIONSHIPS

Parenthood While Buñuel, cinematographer Eli Lotar, and the other filmmakers present the overall systems of poverty at work in the villages, there is also an attention to the plight of the family unit in these mountain communities. Nearly every shot inside the shacks shows a mother attempting to care for starving children, and one of the last shots is that of a family crammed into a single bed. The narrator documents several methods by which the Hurdanos attempt to survive and provide for their families, including treks to bigger towns in Extremadura, moving and tilling the soil strategically, and moving the family around in a nomadic lifestyle. Despite these efforts, children frequently die of hunger, thirst, or disease. The narration also implies that the rate of incest is particularly high in these isolated mountain communities, which in turn leads to birth defects. The only solution, as the Narrator asserts, is for the government to intervene with aid and education.

Illustrative Moment: Interior of the Houses The Narrator explains that the strawberry leaves also serve as bedding for the floor and as fertilizer after they decompose. The camera cuts to a man dumping a sack of leaves on the floor. The camera then cuts to a woman and two children sitting next to a bowl. The Narrator reports that this scene is a typical interior of a house in these villages. The mother starts to cook, and the smoke pours out of the doors. The Narrator explains that the smoke has nowhere to escape, given that these shacks have no chimneys or windows. This scene is one of many that shows the interiors of the shacks where mothers and children pass many hours. In addition, the father's entrance speaks to the parents' attempts to create some sort of home for the family unit despite the miserable conditions of the villages.



LIFE STAGES

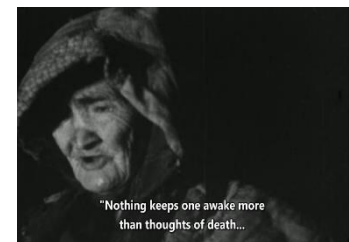
Childhood Many of the film's subjects are children, and very small children at that. The viewer sees babies and toddlers huddled around the hearth inside the shacks and walking through the streets. Two of the most heartrending moments of suffering include the girl dying of a throat infection and the dead infant being passed from man to man as the community marches out to the cemetery. The implication is that childhood as a construct does not exist for the Hurdanos, even if they are able to survive until they are five. They are put to work immediately, and the documentary does not even show children playing. When the filmmakers discuss slightly older children, they emphasize the paltry nature of their clothes and education. The scene of the school lesson suggests that the children can only absorb so much, as they have to worry about survival first. According to the narration, the children only receive bread in school, hence the dark subtitle of the film.

Illustrative Moment: Dead Baby The camera cuts to a shot of a group of adult Hurdanos standing outside the threshold of one of the shacks. The Narrator reports that a child has died. The camera cuts to a shot of a still baby with flies on its face, then there is a close-up of the stoic mother. The father carries the dead baby up the mountain and is followed by a procession of villagers. They pass the body in a cradle across the river. While this scene definitely emphasizes the other key themes of the film (such as poverty and the omnipresence of death), it also speaks to the lack of childhood in this province. Those children who survive the first years of life are condemned to work alongside their parents in misery; therefore, the death march of the cradle becomes a potent symbol of this stage of life in Las Hurdes.



Old Age Due to the miserable conditions of the town, the Hurdanos all seem to be old and worn down. The vast number of dangers and illnesses prevents the adults from reaching old age. The one exception that appears in the film is the wandering old woman who appears for the last night of filming. The Narrator explains that she wanders the streets at night and mourns for lost children. As the oldest member of the town, she incarnates the angel of death or a sort of oracle of misery. In addition, her inability to sleep lends her a supernatural quality as she roams the streets at night. Rather than constituting the last stage of life before death, old age becomes an aberration in the lives of the Hurdanos. Death hangs over the village like a pall.

Illustrative Moment: The Old Woman's Walk As the family sleeps, an old woman roams the streets at night. She chants prayers for the dead and swings a thurible. She proclaims that thinking of death keeps one up at night. These shots of the wandering old woman provide an eerie finale for the film. Whereas the majority of the subjects earlier in the film were children and mothers (who aged prematurely), the old woman is the last Hurdana that the filmmakers capture before their departure. She becomes a symbol of the end of the film and a metonym for the general misery of the province as a whole.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Comment on the genre(s) of this film. Would you classify *Land Without Bread* as a documentary?
2. Given that this short film followed the extremely avant-garde films of *Andalusian Dog* (1929) and *The Age of Gold* (1930), *Land Without Bread* is often characterized as an atypical Buñuel film. What sort of Buñuelian tropes do you see in this film?
3. As with nearly all Buñuel films, *Land Without Bread* juxtaposes human characters with animal stand-ins and bestial symbolism. Is the focus on animals meant to constitute a lesson in zoology or are they there to emphasize the themes of poverty and death?
4. Is the tone of the film detached or empathetic (or both)? Do you think that the narrator is emotionally invested in the misery of the villagers, or does "he" have other motivations?
5. Besides society in general, who is the villain in the film? According to the filmmakers, how can the Spanish government improve the situation?

6. Given that the scenes shot in *Las Hurdes* did not have sound, this film is technically a silent film. What is the effect of the narrator's voice and Brahms's *Fourth Symphony* as the soundtrack of the film (recorded after the fact)?