

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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***THE MILKY WAY / La Voie lactée* (1969)**

Luis Buñuel (1900-1983)

OVERVIEW

Auteur Luis Buñuel is known as one of most influential surrealist filmmakers of the mid-twentieth century. Although he was born and raised near Zaragoza, Spain, he spent a large portion of his life and career as an exile in Paris and Mexico City. One of his earliest short films, *Le chien andalou* (1929), or the *Andalusian Dog*, became an iconic representation of eerie surrealist art in which Buñuel presented the audience with a series of unsettling, violent, and even erotic images plucked from a dream. Buñuel would continue in his surrealist style with such films as *L'Age D'or* (1930), or the *Age of Gold*. Later in his career, the director adapted novels and short stories to film and used the narratives to criticize the Francoist regime and expose the Catholic repression of the era. The middle period of Buñuel's career was characterized by several satirical and allegorical dramas based on Biblical stories and nineteenth-century Spanish novels. Buñuel's production in Mexico in the 1950s and 60s included *Nazarín* (1959), in which the eponymous priest attempts to administer to a rural Mexican community, and *The Exterminating Angel* (1962), a masterful critique of the bourgeoisie. *The Milky Way* (1968), the subject of this essay, acted as a bridge between the Buñuel's Mexican allegories of the 60s and his French satires of the 70s. 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 *The Milky Way* (1969) is a full-length film in color about two modern-day pilgrims who walk from just outside Paris to Santiago de Compostela in northwest Spain (in the province of Galicia). This famous pilgrimage was known both as the Way of the St. James (the patron saint of Spain) and as the Way of the Stars (or Milky Way), hence the film's title. While their encounters in the modern world constitute some of the action, the pilgrimage itself is interspliced with Biblical stories and debates about Catholic doctrine over the centuries. Some of the heresies discussed refer to trials and executions of clergymen during the Inquisition, such as the burning of the Archbishop Carranza of Toledo in 1576. The historical scenes include moments in Jesus's life leading up to his crucifixion, the history of the pilgrimage and its tribute to St. James, the Jansenist rebellion and doctrine of the 18th century, and the Marquis de Sade pontificating to a captive lover. Although much of the film takes place in Spain, the dialogue is almost all in French.

Background The majority of the scenes in this film were shot in the French countryside and at the actual cathedrals and plazas that were stops on the pilgrimage. The film offers panoramic shots of San Sebastián's famed "shell" lake and the outskirts of the city of Santiago de Compostela. The travelogue moments of the film could be interpreted as a parody of Franco's campaign to get tourists to visit Spain in the final years of his dictatorship. According to film critic Julie Jones, Franco used the Way of St. James both for propaganda (often comparing himself to St. James) and as a source of revenue. As with many of his French films, Buñuel worked with the screenwriter Jean-Claude Carrière and cast two of his favorite French actors, Michel Piccoli and Julien Bertheau, as the Marquis de Sade and the pedantic maître d' in the restaurant, respectively. Many critics consider this film one of Buñuel's best religious satires, and this positive critical reaction is underscored by its inclusion in the Criterion Collection. In some ways, *The Milky Way* constitutes a closing chapter for Buñuel's Mexican-Spanish films about well-meaning but eventually disillusioned clergy, such as the wandering priest Nazario in *Nazarín* (1959), the pure aspiring nun in *Viridiana* (1961), and the sacrificial ascetic Simón in *Simón of the Desert* (1965). In addition, *The Milky Way* could be considered a precursor to Buñuel's later French satires: *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972) and *The Phantom of Liberty* (1974).

CHARACTERS

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| <i>Pierre Dupont</i> | The aging pilgrim with sore feet |
| <i>Jean Duval</i> | The young pilgrim |
| <i>Jesus</i> | Son of God who tells parables |
| <i>Virgin Mary</i> | Jesus's mother who also comments on doctrine |
| <i>French Priest in the Bar</i> | The insane clergyman who debates with the cop |
| <i>Cop in the Bar</i> | The policeman who throws out the pilgrims |
| <i>Marquis de Sade</i> | Lascivious 18th-century noble and atheist |
| <i>Thérèse</i> | The Marquis's young prisoner |
| <i>Maître D'</i> | The man who describes the Trinity at the restaurant |
| <i>The Inquisitor</i> | The head judge at the trial of the dissenter |
| <i>Principal</i> | The female director of the Institute Lamartine |
| <i>Renaissance Bishop</i> | The priest who condemns the Archbishop of Toledo in the plaza |
| <i>Priscillian</i> | Bishop of Ávila who leads the sermon in the woods |
| <i>Archbishop of Toledo</i> | Renaissance priest whose skeleton is burnt posthumously |
| <i>The Jesuit</i> | The dissenter who challenges the Jansenist to a duel |
| <i>The Count</i> | Jansenist who insults the Jesuit |
| <i>Angel-Demon</i> | Young hippie who appears at the crash site |
| <i>The Prostitute</i> | Woman who propositions the two pilgrims |
| <i>Spanish Priest at the Inn</i> | The clergyman who explains doctrine about the Virgin Mary |
| <i>Guardia Civil</i> | Cop who questions the four pilgrims at the inn |
| <i>Rodolphe</i> | The shorter Renaissance dissenter turned believer |
| <i>Francois</i> | The taller Renaissance dissenter and skeptic |

SYNOPSIS

Pierre and Jean, two poor French pilgrims, decide to walk from Paris to Santiago de Compostela. They retrace the famed medieval pilgrimage known as the Way of St. James (or the Milky Way) as contemporary (1960s) believers. They stop at historic cathedrals and inns along the way, and they frequently ask for food and money to sustain them. In most cases, the priests, cops, and passersby they encounter refuse to help them, but they do receive bread and wine on occasion. Although they eventually enter the city of Santiago, the pilgrims never make it to the cathedral; their pilgrimage remains incomplete. On their journey, the two pilgrims witness and sometimes engage in scenes of historical discourse about Catholic dogma. In other instances, Pierre and Jean pass by and only the viewer sees the historical "reenactment."

The historical reenactments and doctrinal debates range from the earliest days of Christianity to contemporary discussions about sexuality and marriage. Jesus and Mary appear more than once and perform speeches, miracles, or parables that come from scripture. Along with the ancient references, there are scenes from the Renaissance and the Neoclassical periods, including the Inquisition (which began in the fifteenth century but persisted well into the nineteenth century) and the Jansenist rebellion (1600-1800, roughly). The historical figures and events do not happen in chronological order, but rather appear in the forests and cathedrals that mark the Way of St. James. Most of the historical discussions underscore an age-old debate in Catholic dogma which ended in violence or submission, with the result that the onlookers submit to the winning argument without fully believing its logic or truth. The final scene involves Jesus administering to two blind men who suddenly appear as contemporary pilgrims on the Milky Way. The wanderers are cured, but immediately afterwards, Jesus gives them an ambiguous answer to their philosophical questions.

SCENES

Map of the Pilgrimage Even before the credits, the camera cuts to an old map of France and Spain in which the route of the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela is marked. There is a voiceover narration that explains the history and purpose of the pilgrimage, which began in the early Middle Ages. The narrator also describes the importance of St. James as the patron saint of the city of Santiago. The cathedral is the destination point of the pilgrimage because it contains St. James's remains. Santiago denominates St. James, and Compostela is Latin for field of stars. The narrator goes on to explain that the Way of St. James is also known as the journey of the stars, or Milky Way.



Pierre and Jean's First Encounter The camera cuts to a country road with a sign that indicates the location as somewhere between Paris and Fontainebleau. We see Jean and Pierre on either side of the road walking towards the camera slowly and using walking sticks. The pilgrims see a man in a black cape and hat approaching and ask him for money. The man retorts that he will give Pierre money because he already has some, but he will not give to a vagabond who has nothing. The man continues to pontificate about procreation, suggesting that the pilgrims impregnate a prostitute and name their sons "You are not my people" and "No more mercy", respectively. The man walks away in the opposite direction of the pilgrims, who are left bewildered and ask each other why the man behaved so strangely. Jean looks back and notices that the man is accompanied by a dwarf who releases a white dove into the air. The two pilgrims surmise that the little man must have been hiding under the man's cloak.



The Gravitas of Beards Pierre and Jean continue processing their encounter with the man in the cape, and Jean suggests that Pierre received money because his beard inspires confidence. Pierre nods in agreement, and explains that his mother wanted him to keep his beard. The camera cuts to the first ancient Judea scene with Joseph sawing wood. The camera pans right to Mary kneading a large ball of dough in a wash basin. The camera then cuts to Jesus, who is sharpening a razor and filling a basin in order to shave. When Mary suggests that he should keep his beard because it flatters him, Jesus throws out the water.



Kid with a Bloody Wound Pierre and Jean come upon a young boy sitting roadside. They notice that he has blood on his white shirt and forehead. The pilgrims ask the boy if he is ok and if he would like them to escort him back to the village. The boy shakes his head but does not respond, and the pilgrims continue on. Jean tries to hitchhike, but the cars pass him. The boy rises and hails a car for the pilgrims. When they get in, the driver asks where they are headed. The pilgrims respond Spain, and the driver says that he will drive overnight to the border. Pierre and Jean settle in for a long overnight sleep. When Jean murmurs "goddamn" as he lies back, the driver is offended and kicks the pilgrims out of the car.



Discussion: A Cop and a Priest in a Bar

The camera cuts to a bar and café where a priest is drinking coffee. A cop approaches him and sits down, and the viewer sees them from behind. The camera cuts to a close frontal shot of the pair, who are now in the middle of a doctrinal discussion about Christ's miracles. The cop asserts that all miracles can be explained with science, including those performed by Christ. The priest does not disagree but retorts that today's science actually reinforces the scriptures; thus, the whole world has become Catholic. The cop asks how the whole world can be Catholic if there are Muslims and Jews, and the priest replies that they are even more Catholic than Catholics. The two pilgrims arrive. The priest suggests that the bar owner let them in from the cold, and the two pilgrims sit at an adjacent table. The priest continues to describe the dogma related to the sacrament of the Eucharist and Transubstantiation, proclaiming that the host literally becomes the body of Christ through the sacrament. He asserts that the Eucharist should not be interpreted as a metaphor or symbol, even if such sects as the Calvinists have done so in the past. The waiter chimes in, saying that like Jesus and the Host, the rabbit becomes part of the pâté while still remaining a rabbit. Pierre also engages the priest and asks what happens to Christ's body once he is consumed in his stomach. Rather than responding to Pierre's question, the cop demands that the pilgrims show their IDs. He tells them to get out, while the priest offers sympathy that the pilgrims did not eat anything. The cop replies that the law trumps charity. As the pilgrims exit, the bar owner hands them a baguette. After their departure, the priest suddenly agrees with the waiter's metaphor about the pâté. The cop reminds the priest that he is contradicting himself on doctrine, and the priest throws his coffee in the cop's face. Suddenly, a white van from an insane asylum drives up to the bar. The nurses get out and escort the priest outside. The bar owner and cop remark that they didn't realize that the priest was mentally ill, and one of the orderlies guesses that the cop contradicted the priest.



Ritual Mass in the Woods

Pierre and Jean are left outside at night. Jean collects twigs for a fire, and they try to stay warm. The pilgrims hear a monastic chant and see a shepherd approaching them. The shepherd speaks Latin and invites the pilgrims to a ceremony, as long as they watch and do not speak. The subtitles offer a translation of the shepherd's Latin phrases for the viewer. However, Jean and Pierre do not understand the Latin and do not join the ceremony. The shepherd walks into the woods and ties up his sheep. A group of partially naked women dress each other in Grecian-style dresses while a priest (later revealed to be Priscillian) explains the sect's doctrine about the human body. Several women take turns describing how the body is sinful, lustful, and of the Devil. The conclusion is that the body is not of Christ—only the spirit. The priest signs the cross over them, and they all disperse and lie down in the forest (with the implication that an orgy might follow). Priscillian takes out a piece of bread and tears pieces for his two disciples. He proclaims that he did not make the bread, and he is not one of the responsible for Christ's corporeal suffering. While all three eat, Priscillian curses those that tortured Jesus. He then embraces two women of the sect and leads them away. Note: this scene most likely alludes to the ceremony in which Priscillian was named the Bishop of Ávila in fourth-century Hispania.



Lack of Faith

The camera cuts back to the pilgrims trying to stay warm in the rain. Pierre complains about the lightning, and Jean asks him if he believes in God. Pierre is offended, and Jean walks out into the field and yells up to God to strike him with lightning if he is real. Jean returns to the fire, but seconds later, lightning strikes a nearby hut. Pierre scoffs at Jean's arrogance and warns him that God is not at his beck and call.

The Cathedral and the Restaurant The pilgrims arrive in a town plaza and look at a medieval cathedral. Pierre leans over a baby carriage to look at the infant inside (whom the viewer does not see). Pierre and Jean walk across a field that adjoins a hotel restaurant. Inside, a maître d and waiters prepare the dining room while the maître d pontificates about atheism. He suggests that only demented men don't believe in God.



The Marquis de Sade The camera cuts abruptly to a dark chamber in the Marquis de Sade's dungeon. A young girl named Thérèse is chained to the floor and rubs her ankle where the manacle is irritating her. The Marquis de Sade rants about the delusion of God, saying that there wouldn't be so much evil in the world if he existed. He goes on to proclaim that God is a chimera invented to manipulate men into violence and that belief in him is madness. Although she remains at his mercy, Thérèse yells back "God exists" several times. The Marquis does not respond but approaches her steadily.

The Maître D' At the restaurant where the maître d continues asserting that only demented people are atheists. One of the maids approaches and admits that she never understood how Jesus could be God and man at the same time. The maître d' explains that the devil could also take multiple forms, yet he was still the devil at all times. He goes on to explain the doctrinal debates with respect to Jesus's form, with some sects (such as the Monophysites) asserting that Jesus's human form was an illusion and he never was of the flesh. The maître d' also describes the opposite doctrine, which suggests that Jesus was only a man. One of the waiters agrees that Christ had to be a man with bodily functions, even if he is always depicted as solemn.



Jesus: Banquet and Parable The camera suddenly cuts to Jesus walking with his disciples. A man approaches and invites them to a banquet. The guests prompt Jesus to say a few words, and he tells the story of a steward who is in danger of being thrown out by his master. In order to save his position, the steward convinces the master's debtors to pay back a portion of what they owe and be forgiven the rest. Because of his shrewdness, the steward keeps his job.



Water Into Wine At the end of the parable, the servants indicate that they have run out of wine. Jesus tells them to fill the jugs with water, and they will become wine. Rather than show the miracle, the camera cuts back to the restaurant where the first customers of the evening have arrived. The maître d' ends his discourse by describing the Council of Nicaea, where the ambiguity about Jesus's essence was officially resolved. The customers ask what they were discussing, and the female diner comments that Jesus succeeded above other prophets because he was God.



Picnic The pilgrims continue on to a nearby field where a group of bourgeois parents are having a picnic. Pierre suggests that they ask one of the mothers for food, and she agrees to share the family's chicken. The principal of a Catholic girls' school explains that the youngest girls will perform recitations that underscore the school's dedication to "living religion". The school girls line up in front of their parents. Each one has a line about Catholic dogma, and the other girls (a la Greek chorus) respond to each recitation with "He who does not believe is an anathema" or "let him be condemned." These recitations are interspersed with Jean's vision of a group of young rebels marching in the streets. The march ends with the Pope in white regalia facing a firing squad of rebels. God intended for man to be an omnivore and that he gifted them with animals as food. Therefore, humanity should not feel guilty about the suffering of animals.



The Demon – Angel’s sermon The pilgrims walk outside Bayonne and try to hail down a ride. When a white car passes by without stopping, Jean yells after the driver: “I hope you crash.” As soon as Jean turns his back, the driver crashes and the car goes up in flames. Pierre suggests that they call the police. A male voice from the back seat says: “Don’t do it—they’ll hold you up for hours.” When the pilgrims are startled and ask how he appeared suddenly, the young man replies that he often gets in “at the last moment”—in this case, when the curse was spoken. The demon-angel appears outside the car and turns on the car radio, where a man preaches in a Castilian dialect of Spanish. The angel-demon interprets the radio discourse in French, and they realize that the central thesis of the sermon is that prayers and repentance are worthless. The angel-demon adds that he still believes in God’s forgiveness someday. THE angel-demon suggests that Pierre take the dead driver’s shoes.



Inquisition The camera cuts to a reenactment of an Inquisitorial trial of the 16th century. The prisoner stands in front of the Inquisitors and argues that confirmation and unction are not sacraments of Christ and that purgatory does not exist. The Inquisitor responds with “that is anathema” and exhorts him to recant. The prisoner refuses to recant, and the Inquisitor sentences him to be executed. The guards lead the prisoner back to his cell. One of the priests in the audience stops the Inquisitor and expresses his concern about executions. He suggests that it was not God’s intention for the clergy to kill others who wish to debate doctrine, and he worries that condemnation will lead to perpetual violence. The Inquisitor responds that he is enforcing the law, or the “secular arm”, which does call for execution in cases of sedition. The young priest submits.

Jesuits punish Jansenists: The Nun’s Crucifixion The nuns enter into a chapel, including two who carry a cross. A carriage approaches with two 18th-century gentlemen. One of the nuns is submitting to a partial crucifixion (the cross is laying on the ground rather than upright). Another sister nails her right hand to the cross in front of the other sisters, and the Mother Superior begs the suffering nun to recant and avoid her suffering. A count appears as a witness to the semi-crucifixion and nods his agreement with the Mother Superior. The nun refuses to recant and presents her left hand to be nailed to the cross. She asks that everyone leave her, and the nuns file out. Meanwhile outside, the 18th-century gentleman (later revealed as the Jesuit) explains to Jean and Pierre that the nuns are Jansenists who must be punished for their fanaticism.



Dueling: Jansenist vs. Jesuits The count who was visiting the crucified nun leaves the chapel, and the Jesuit outside confronts him. The Count insults the Jesuits, saying they only come out at night like rats. The Jesuit accuses the Count, now revealed as a Jansenist, of heretical beliefs. The two continue insulting each other and challenge each other to a duel. The Jesuit asks Pierre and Jean to act as their seconds in the dual. The pilgrims agree, eat and drink as the two gentlemen spar. Although both gentlemen fence well and vigorously, they also manage to debate their respective doctrines: the Jesuits believe in free will, whereas the Jansenists believe in predeterminism. The Count also proclaims that Christ did not die for man's sins. Pierre and Jean begin to discuss the doctrine in question as the two gentlemen continue dueling. Pierre explains that freedom means the will to choose between good and bad actions. Jean resists both philosophies, saying that he cannot control his actions if they are predetermined by God, nor does he have free will if God is omniscient and omnipotent. The men stop dueling and seem to be conversing in a friendly manner as they leave the field.



Rodolphe and Francois The pilgrims cross the border into Spain and hope that their paperwork is solid. They visit the Concha de San Sebastián (Shell of San Sebastian), and there is a beautiful panoramic shot of the lake. As they continue on to Burgos, Jean and Pierre come upon a pair of Renaissance travelers (later revealed to be Rodolphe and Francois) with a donkey laden with supplies. The historical pair ask Jean and Pierre to lead the donkey to a nearby inn and wait for them there. Rodolphe gives Pierre a gold coin to seal the deal, and the pilgrims agree. Rodolphe and Francois run to the village in order to witness the ritual burning of a heretic.



Burning the Body The camera cuts to an exterior shot of a cathedral where pantalooned guards are securing the perimeter of the plaza. A bishop and a group of priest process out into the plaza while a group of men carry coffins to and from the adjoining graveyard. The lid of one of the coffins is lifted to reveal a skeleton wearing a bishop's hat. The living bishop approaches the open coffin and reports that while his colleague was originally buried with blessings, he has been recently revealed as a heretic. The bishop explains that he discovered a secret manuscript in which his colleague questioned the nature of the Trinity. The guards take away the coffin with the manuscript inside, and they set it on fire. Rodolphe and Francois watch the denouncement and burning from a covered stone balcony. The bishop reasserts that Jesus is God, man, and the Holy Spirit. Rodolphe shouts out that Jesus was a man and not God. The guards chase the dissenters through the forest, but the pilgrims manage to escape.



Transformation in the Woods After they escape the guards, Rodolphe and Francois come upon two contemporary men rowing and swimming in a lake. They notice that the rowers have left their clothes on a rock, and they decide to change their period costumes for the hunting suits of the rowers. Rodolphe and Francois, now dressed as 1960s hunters, carry their rifles through the forest and look for game. When one discovers a necklace of rosary beads in the pocket of the suit jacket, the other explains that the beads are used for praying to Mary. Both scoff at the ritual, and Francois throws the beads over a tree branch. Rodolphe shoots at the necklace.

Seeing the Virgin Mary Later that night, Rodolphe and Francois see a flock of sheep in a corral and stop to rest. Suddenly, they hear a harp playing and see a bright light. The Virgin Mary appears in her baby blue robe, looking just as she had in the Jesus scenes. She holds the recently destroyed rosary necklace and hands it to Rodolphe. When he tries to relate what happened to Francois, the latter says that Rodolphe is tired and hallucinating.



Night at the Inn The camera cuts to Pierre and Jean eating bread and drinking wine at the inn. Once again, there is a priest and two cops—now of the Spanish Guardia Civil— who end up conversing. The two cops approach Pierre and Jean and ask to see their IDs. Later, when Rodolphe and Francois arrive, the cops ask whether they caught any game and whether they have a hunting license. They say yes and proceed to check on the donkey that Pierre and Jean led to the stables. Later, the cops leave, and Rodolphe approaches the priest in the tavern. He relates his vision of the Virgin Mary and shows the priest the recovered rosary beads. The priest comments that the Virgin Mary frequently visits believers and performs miracles.



Virgin Mary's Miracles The priest offers to tell all four pilgrims and the inn's employees a story about the Virgin Mary's miracles. The story begins with a frugal and industrious nun who worked as the treasurer for the convent. When she is seduced by a young man, she decides to leave her calling and go away with him. On the eve of her departure, she prays to the statue of the Virgin Mary, asks for forgiveness, and leaves the key to the safe with the statue. Years pass, and the ex-nun has several children with her lover. She decides that she wishes to repent one day, and she returns to the convent. When she enters the chapel, none of the other sisters make a fuss. The priest explains that the Virgin Mary had taken the sister's form and performed her duties while she was away, thereby allowing the woman to return to the convent unscathed. When the priest ends the story, all agree that the Virgin had performed a beautiful miracle.

The Virtue of Virginit The priest and the four pilgrims start to go to their respective bedrooms. The innkeeper forces the two hunters to sleep in different rooms. Rodolphe leaves the room, and the innkeeper insists that he does not open the door for anyone. The innkeeper puts Rodolphe in the same room with a beautiful young virgin. The two roommates flirt with each other but stay in separate beds. Alarmed, the priest approaches and asks to enter. Rodolphe won't let him in, so the priest preaches at the pair from the other side of the bedroom door. He describes the pure nature of the Virgin Mary, from the Immaculate Conception to her life after Jesus's birth. The priest admits that there have been dissenters on the question of Mary's virginity, but he assures them that his interpretation is the correct dogma. The young woman and Rodolphe agree and offer their own metaphors regarding the Virgin Mary's purity, such as the Renaissance trope of a beam of light penetrating glass without breaking it. Suddenly, the priest appears inside the bedroom and continues his speech. He reminds them that virginity and purity must be guarded carefully and that the couple should not have premarital or casual sex. The young woman assures the priest that she is a virgin, but he remains dubious. When Rodolphe suggests marriage, the priest warns them that some scholars consider all manner of intercourse a sin, even between man and wife. Another guest in Francois's room reads a book in bed. He declares that his hatred of science and his horror at technology will lead him to an "absurd" belief in Christ one day.

Santiago de Compostela, at Last! Jean and Pierre arrive in Santiago and look at the cathedral from a distance. When they walk into town, they see a blonde across the street. She beckons them to cross and starts flirting with them. When Jean explains that they are pilgrims headed towards the cathedral, she replies that there are no longer tourists or pilgrims anywhere near the cathedral anymore. Alarmed, the pilgrims ask why. She explains that the remains in the cathedral were not of St. James, but rather of the Roman ascetic Priscillian.

Deal with the Prostitute The prostitute propositions them and asks for money. Jean offers her the gold coin that they received from the Rodolphe. The three run into the woods to have sex. The prostitute informs them that she would like a son of Jean, and she would name him "These Are Not My People." Pierre asks for his own son, and she replies that he would be named "No More Mercy."



The Blind Men's Encounter with Jesus While Jean and Pierre are having a three-way in the woods, two new blind pilgrims appear. They listen intently, and one suggests that Jesus is nearby. Jesus and his disciples do indeed appear, and as they are walking, the apostles debate whether or not Jesus can actually die. The blind pilgrims kneel before Jesus and proclaim their faith. Jesus rubs dirt and spits in their eyes, thereby restoring their vision. While the men marvel at the beauty of the forest, Jesus exhorts his disciples not to tell the stories of his miracles.



Disappointing Doctrine Jesus goes on to explain that he is not on earth to promote peace, but rather discord. The blind pilgrims interject and ask Jesus for “black and white” answers. Jesus does not answer directly but asserts that man should love Him above all others, even their parents and children. He continues on with his disciples, leaving the previously blind pilgrims in confusion. The pilgrims attempt to follow but stop in front of a crack in the ground. The camera zooms in on one cane poking the crack and focuses on the verdant grass on the ground. The church bells chime loudly as a text appears. The paragraph states that all of the dogma and debates presented in the film come from Church doctrine and scholarly documents.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

PIERRE

As the elder pilgrim, Pierre struggles to walk for the whole pilgrimage. He understands the dogma better than Jean and is also more receptive to the priests' arguments. He seems to believe in God fully.

Amiable Pierre interacts well with the people whom he encounters. He usually listens to the argument politely and does not antagonize them. For example, he supports the mentally disturbed priest in his explanation of the Eucharist, and he listens attentively to the Spanish priest's stories about the Virgin Mary. He asks help from others and also offers help.

Assertive Pierre is the first one to ask for food, money, and assistance from the innkeepers, priests, and maître d'. His friendly demeanor allows him to get money from the caped man and bread from various inns. He also convinces the prostitute to have a menage à trois in the woods. At first, she only wants to sleep with Jean, but Pierre convinces her to “bear” him a son, as well.

JEAN

Jean is the younger 1960s pilgrim who frequently questions the doctrine.

Aggressive Although Pierre usually engages with others on the pilgrimage, it is often Jean who pushes the issue. He persists in asking for food and shelter when the pilgrims are denied, and he is not afraid to contest or question the arguments presented to him. It is also Jean who procures the gold coin from Rodolphe, sex from the prostitute, and the ham from the inn. At times his aggression causes problems, as when the driver ejects him for cursing or when he “incites” the fatal car crash.

Contrarian Unlike Pierre, Jean frequently rejects or questions the doctrine presented to him. He questions the notion of predetermination, in particular. He also doubts the existence of God. This skepticism is played out most overtly in the thunder storm, when Jean walks out into the field and dares God to strike him with lightning—if he does really exist.

RODOLPHE

Rodolphe is the shorter Renaissance pilgrim who dissents on the question of the Trinity. Although Rodolphe does not appear until the last third or so of the film, his interactions with the Renaissance bishop, Spanish priest, and the other guests at the inn make him the lynchpin of the plot.

Aggressive In some ways, Rodolphe becomes a parallel protagonist to Jean. He is a young and rebellious pilgrim who dares to question the bishop at the burning of the archbishop's body. Later, after transforming into a 1960s hunter, he is the one who shoots the rosary beads. At the inn, Rodolphe pursues sex with the young woman (although he eventually relents).

Transformed After his interaction with the Virgin Mary, Rodolphe transforms from skeptic to believer. The viewer does not know whether the young man now believes in the Trinity, but he accepts the doctrine regarding virtue and the immaculate conception wholeheartedly.

JESUS

As the recognizable Savior from the Scriptures, Jesus performs many of the miracles for which he is known. However, this version of Jesus also strays from the traditional portrayal of the Son of God.

Argumentative Jesus often disagrees with or chides his disciples, and he also shows a slight disdain and frustration towards his followers. He contradicts the doctrine that the disciples lay out, particularly with regard to the Trinity and his purpose on Earth. His parable at the banquet seems to suggest an alternate lesson to that of honesty and charity.

Weary Along with his general frustration towards others, Jesus wants to cast off the Savior image thrust upon him. The viewer senses this resignation when he stops shaving his beard with just a word from Mary. He does not want to have a record of his miracles, and He rejects the notion that his coming is meant to improve human lives or behavior.

THEMES

SOCIETY

Religion

Dogma While the pilgrimage of the two “modern” wanderers ties the scenes together, the true heart of the film is the debates about the scriptures and Catholic doctrine. Buñuel and Carrière present a number of persistent debates within the Catholic Church, including the viability of the Trinity, the effectiveness of Transubstantiation (the bread becoming the body of Christ), and the corporeal and spiritual characteristics of Jesus and Mary. Although the dominant clergy spell out the agreed upon doctrine for each case (often citing the Council or scholar who settled the question), they immediately undermine their arguments by citing the dissenting opinions of other saints or scholars. In addition, Buñuel and Carrière lean into the theories of the dissecting sects of Catholicism over the centuries: the Jansenists, who preferred predeterminism to free will, and The Jesuits, who emphasized free will. The result is that those who listen and obey are left with more philosophical and doctrinal ambiguity. Even Jesus equivocates and contradicts himself, which leaves his followers with an uncomfortable uncertainty. Despite the nuance and contradictory nature of the dogma, the authorities insist that the people accept and follow the “correct” interpretation. In this way, Buñuel and Carrière effectively satirize and criticize the unstable narratives of the Catholic Church.

Heresy Several authority figures accuse other believers of heresy, and those who commit the crime are punished, banished, or cursed. In the case of the Inquisition, the accused are executed (often burned) and condemned to hell. The nature of the heresy is flimsy at best and varies from period to period. Essentially, those who question the dogma of the period (or the decisions of the Council of Nicaea or Trent) are immediately labeled as heretics. This attitude pervades the various periods of Catholic doctrine, and even the contemporary priests demand compliance. The residue of this 15th-17th century mentality takes form in the recitations of the Catholic schoolgirls at the picnic. As part of a performance for their parents, each girl recites a piece of Catholic dogma and proclaims that he who does not believe is an anathema. This language carries over into the Inquisitorial flashback, where the panel of judges accuses the dissenter of heresy. Buñuel and Carrière also allude to political oppression that goes hand in hand with religious doctrine. The dissenters are punished by both the laws of the Church and the laws of the State. This Inquisitorial attitude is mirrored in the twentieth-century union between the Catholic Church and Spanish dictatorships—in particular, Franco’s alliance with the Church in the 1940s and 50s. In this way, heresy covers all manner of dissent, including art made by exiles such as Buñuel.

The Eucharist and Transubstantiation One of the principle doctrinal debates in the film is the concept of transubstantiation—that is, whether the bread of the Host and the wine really transform into the body and blood of Christ. According to the Fourth Council of the Lateran in 1215 and the Council of Trent in 1551, the bread and wine offered in the sacrament of the Eucharist does, by some mysterious power,

transform into the body and blood of Christ. Between the two councils, there remained a debate as to the nature of the transformation and importance of the Eucharist, and it is this lingering doubt that the clergy debate throughout the film. Even when the clergy characters are not directly debating transubstantiation, bread appears in several scenes: the characters knead, bake, and eat bread, and some characters also distribute bread to others. Ironically, the sermon in the forest concludes with a modified communion among the priests—even though they had just asserted that the human body is not of Christ, but of the Devil.

Saints The principal focus of the pilgrimage is on two ancient saints of Catholic Hispania: St James, one of Jesus's twelve disciples and the patron saint of Spain, and Priscillian, a Roman-born ascetic who also preached to the Christians in Hispania. St. James's bones were reported to be kept at the cathedral at Santiago, hence its importance as the destination of the medieval pilgrimage. Some of the male characters in the film could be interpreted as incarnations of St. James—most notably the caped man in the beginning of the film. Film critic Alison T. Smith suggests that the caped man could represent either a version of St. James or a version of Christ. His dwarf companion, who magically appears from under the man's cape, could incarnate the Santo Niño de Atocha (the saint that represents Jesus as a small child), or the Son of the Trinity (with the white dove as the Holy Spirit). In any case, both figures set the stage for the doctrinal debates and the reverence of saints throughout the film. Priscillian, conversely, was executed for heresy and sorcery in 380, particularly due to his practice of administering mass outside of Church. When the prostitute explains that Priscillian's bones lie in the cathedral (as opposed to the remains of St. James), Pierre and Jean immediately lose interest in their pilgrimage. Other saints are mentioned as proponents or dissenters of particular dogmas, such as Thomas of Aquinas. There is also a debate as to the nature of the Virgin Mary and whether her purity provided her with a saint-like status. In the end, the reverence towards the saints only lasts as long as the doctrinal logic holds out, with the result that the characters' faith often wanes.

Virtues The clergy characters and philosophers throughout the film comment on and describe virtue, but they rarely enact the good works of St. James themselves. The virtue held in the highest esteem is faith, and in particular, an unyielding belief in the prevailing dogma of the given period. When the discussion moves towards the conduct and nature of women, the priests cite purity as the highest virtue. The priest in the tavern suggests that the Virgin Mary's virtue allowed her to transcend the flesh and become something beyond a human being. The metaphor that Rodolphe uses is rooted in Renaissance narratives of Marianism: the Holy Spirit was the beam of light that "penetrated" the pane of glass (Mary's womb) without breaking it. The priest exhorts the female guest to aspire to Mary's greatness. One of the key seven virtues, charity, is conspicuously lacking throughout the film. The pilgrims frequently ask for money from those they encounter, but the clergy and the police refuse to give them anything. Ironically, it is the servant at the bar and the picnicking couple at the school performance who agree to share their food with Pierre and Jean. Ultimately, the clergymen in the film do not practice what they preach.

Miracles The priests who discuss dogma frequently recount the miracles associated with Jesus and the Virgin Mary: multiplying the loaves and fishes, turning water into wine, transubstantiation, the immaculate conception, amid others. The discussion of Mary's purity in the inn is set off by the hunters' report of seeing the Virgin appear to them. The priest reports that the Virgin has performed thousands of miracles all over the world (and he has the stories to back it up). In the final scene, Jesus acts out the miracle of restoring eyesight to the contemporary blind men on the pilgrimage. Even though the disciples, the viewer, and the men themselves witness the miracle, Jesus asks his disciples not to talk about his deeds. The implication is that the miracles cannot be confirmed, which sows doubt in the doctrinal scholars of other periods. There is also an oblique reference to St. James's miracles, including his reincarnation in the mythical Battle of Clavijo (844), where he appeared in order to restore Moorish-held La Rioja to the Catholic Goths. In this story, St. James wielded an impressive sword and slaughtered the Moors. According to film critic Alison T. Smith, the sword that the Spanish priest drops in the inn may well be alluding to that particular miracle of St. James. Regardless of the source of the miracle, there remains a skepticism as to how and why the miracles occurred. This doubt provides fodder for perpetual debate throughout the film.

Sacrifice and Suffering Although they complain frequently, the pilgrims consider their uncomfortable walk as a purification. Pierre, in particular, suffers from old age, worn shoes, and sore feet. The priests

frequently discuss the suffering of Jesus during the crucifixion, which is acted out partially by the nun who submits to stigmata in the chapel. Although the nun asserts that she does not feel pain, her grimaces and sweat suggest otherwise. When the priests debate whether Jesus was a man of the flesh, there is a question as to whether he actually suffered pain or even if he could actually die. The dogma maintains that Christ did suffer and die for humanity's sins, thereby erasing original sin. In the last scene with Jesus and his disciples, the son of God becomes irritated when one of the disciples suggests that He cannot die. Jesus says "Get thee behind me, Satan," thereby suggesting that Jesus was asserting that he was at least partially of the flesh; therefore, he would experience the full suffering of the crucifixion.

QUEST

Search Like the pilgrims of the Middle Ages, Pierre and Jean seek some sort of purification or redemption through the process of walking. However, the characters never talk about the goals of the pilgrimage (or what they will do when they arrive at Santiago). Instead, they describe their physical discomfort with occasional forays into philosophical discussions. Their efforts fail to produce any tangible results, even when they arrive in Santiago at the film's conclusion. Rather than continue to the cathedral, the two pilgrims are distracted by the prostitute they encounter. When they learn that the relics of St James do not lie in the cathedral, the pilgrims immediately give up on their quest. This unsatisfying ending underscores the absurdist nature and satirical tone of the film as a whole. In addition to the pilgrimage, many of the historical figures engage in their own philosophical or rhetorical quest. Whenever a doctrinal debate arises, the clergyman or figure in power attempts to convince or coerce the others involved in the debate. The motivation to secure a certain dogma persists throughout the film, often leading to violence and oppression. Although some figures "submit" to the required doctrine, it is implied that the listeners are not convinced; rather, they kowtow to the authority figure of the period. Those who debate the doctrine are met with scorn or punishment, and they lack answers to their questions. In this sense, both the physical quest for purification and the intellectual quest for clarity, truth, and security in faith fail.

PHILOSOPHY

Science vs. Religion Rather than a binary choice, several characters go back and forth between reason and faith. They often change their minds about their beliefs in the face of a miracle or argument. The most notable example is Rodolphe, who moves from skepticism to belief after seeing the Virgin Mary in the forest. Francois suggests that he was hallucinating, but Rodolphe has faith in the Virgin's powers thereafter. His belief is so strong in the moment that he refrains from propositioning the beautiful virgin in his room at the inn. The older tourist at the end remarks that he may be driven to faith by his abhorrence of technology, which suggests that even an atheist may turn to religion under extreme duress or the fear of death. In addition to a change of heart, some characters suggest that science and religion are not mutually exclusive. In the very first debate in the very first inn, the priest asserts that modern science "confirms" the scriptures. We can see this symbiotic relationship between science and religion with respect to the pilgrimage itself: the pilgrims used astronomy to guide them to the religious shrine. After all, The Milky Way connotes both the path of the pilgrimage itself as well as the beauty and complexity of the galaxy. On the other hand, the application of a scientific or Socratic method often breaks down the accepted dogma, with the result that the dissenter must be executed in order to preserve the religious narrative. It is this muddy relationship between science and reason that creates a satirical framing of Catholic dogma throughout the film.

Free Will vs Determinism This debate occurs when the Jesuit and Jansenist are dueling: while the Jesuit asserts that man has free will and can choose to do good acts (with his Grace), the Jansenist argues that all actions (good and bad) are predetermined by God. This particular argument gains more weight because Pierre and Jean also discuss this issue while they watch the duel. After hearing Pierre's summary of the Jansenist position, Jean suggests that he cannot control his actions if they were predetermined. Furthermore, Jean wonders why he should strive to be good if God had already chosen the bad action for him. Pierre replies that God's grace helps him to perform good acts, but Jean remains unconvinced. This particular argument, while framed in an 18th-century doctrinal debate, also speaks to the pilgrims' own actions in the film. Pierre and Jean commit various sins by the end of the film: they curse, they lie, they steal, they covet, and they have a threesome with a prostitute. They also perform

some good acts, such as helping each other and offering to assist the wounded boy. The viewer can question whether their bad actions were predetermined. They may also wonder why they set out on the pilgrimage in the first place: Do they want to imitate the good works of St. James?

Absurdism The characters often refer to a particular argument or belief as “absurd,” but this adjective does not serve the purpose of undercutting the argument. Rather, the absurd conclusion or assertion is often more rooted in logic or reason than the “decided” doctrine. This subjective use of the word absurd underscores the overall absurdism of dogma in general. The argument becomes circular or nonsensical, with a result that the listeners are not satisfied by the answer. This thirst for truth and the inability to arrive at it is a motivating force for the film, as Buñuel himself once remarked. Questions beget more questions, even when the listener wants to believe and asks for the “black and white”, as is the blind men’s request to Jesus. In addition, the same arguments come up more than once in the film. The nature of the Trinity, in particular, springs up multiple times during various debates in various periods / locations. Moreover, the non-linear movement of the scenes in the film further confuses the viewer and the pilgrims. This use of repetition and circular movement are hallmarks of absurdist theatre, which was particularly popular in Europe and Latin America in the 1950s and 60s. Like the vagabonds in *Waiting for Godot*, the exemplar of absurdist theatre, Pierre and Jean wander around, philosophize, and never arrive at their destination.

JUSTICE

Violence There is both explicit and implicit violence that occurs in nearly every stop on the pilgrimage. Several characters appear bleeding from wounds: the boy at the side of the road, the nun submitting to her own partial crucifixion, and the dead body of the cursed driver in the 1960s sedan. Ironically, the duel does not result in blood, injury, or death, but neither the viewer nor the pilgrims foresee this ending when the Jansenist and Jesuit begin to fight. Pierre and Jean try to help after the fact, but they usually happen upon the violence when it is already in progress. On occasion, there is the petty violence of contemporary disagreements, such as the mentally disturbed priest throwing coffee in the cop’s face. Perhaps the most insidious violence, however, is that which results from official verbal condemnation or personal threat. One of the most disturbing scenes occurs during the flashback to the Marquis de Sade’s dungeon. The implication is that the Marquis has been raping Thérèse continually and keeps her as his prisoner. Each time a bishop or inquisitor speaks of doctrine, there is an execution of the so-called heretic. Even during the picnic scene, Jean imagines the execution of the Pope via firing squad. While the scene at the inn is more concerned with purity and sexual transgression, there is the reminder of medieval battle in the form of the dropped saber.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What is the film’s message with respect to dogma? Are any of the debates settled by the end of the film?
2. Why are the historical scenes not in chronological order?
3. How does the continual and repeated debate over the Trinity tie together the themes of the film as a whole?
4. Pierre and Jean are the primary pilgrims and observers for most of the film, but in the last few scenes, Rodolphe and Francois take over as the protagonists. In the very last scene, the blind men become the pilgrims. What is the effect of multiple pairs throughout the film?
5. Is the style of this film surreal, absurdist, or both?
6. What is the effect of the location and city-scape shots? Is it important that actual stops on the Milky Way are put into the film?
7. Like most of Bunuel’s works, *The Milky Way* is a satire, but do you think it is a drama or a comedy? Where is the humor?