

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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That Obscure Object of Desire / Cet obscur objet du désir / (1977)
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. Films in this period include Mexican-made satires such as *Nazarín* (1959), *Viridiana* (1961), and *Simón of the Desert* (1964). In the last phase of his career, Buñuel returned to his hyper-erotic and surreal style, including the subject of this essay, *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977). As Buñuel's last completed film, *Object* is often grouped with other Buñuel films that have a similar style, theme and sensibility—especially *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972) and *Phantom of Liberty* (1974).

Film *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977) is one of the few Buñuel films in color and one of several films in French (although there is also Spanish spoken in some scenes). The plot concerns an elder Frenchman who remembers his turbulent affair with a young Spanish woman named Conchita. The film is an adaptation of the novel *The Woman and the Puppet* (1898) by Pierre Louÿs. As with most of his French films made after 1965, Buñuel co-wrote the screenplay with Jean-Claude Carrière and cast his favorite Spanish actor, Fernando Rey, as the aging protagonist Mathieu. Not surprisingly, Buñuel also used the voice of his favorite French actor, Michel Piccoli, to read Mathieu's lines. Unlike his other French offerings, Buñuel did not cast his go-to French actresses such as Catherine Deneuve or Delphine Seyrig, both of whom had leading roles in his films of the late 1960s and 1970s. Instead, the director chose to double-cast the role of the young Conchita. The different interpretations offered by Carole Bouquet and Ángela Molina infuse the film with a “meta” sensibility and contribute to Buñuel's trademark surrealist style.

Background Along with being Buñuel's last film before his death in 1983, *That Obscure Object of Desire* acts as a fitting finale for the director's Parisian productions of the 1970s. Although some scenes were shot in California at the Paramount Studios, others were shot on location in France and Spain. In particular, the house that Mathieu buys for Conchita was an actual house with a patio in Seville. This freedom to travel to multiple countries and work with different producers and technicians underscores Buñuel's position as a respected director in the twilight of his career. The decision to cast two actors for the role of Conchita became a happy accident: Buñuel and producer Serge Silberman decided to try the innovative casting after the original actress in the role did not get along with the others on set. *Obscure Object* was nominated for Best Foreign Film at the 1977 Academy Awards but did not win. Nonetheless, this film remains a highly influential avant-garde film of the 1970s, hence its inclusion in the famed Criterion Collection. Critics often frame this film as a thematic “sequel” to *The Milky Way* (1967), *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972), and the *Phantom of Liberty* (1974).

CHARACTERS

<i>Mathieu Faber</i>	Elder Frenchman
<i>Conchita Pérez</i>	Mathieu's young lover from Seville
<i>Encarnación Pérez</i>	Conchita's mother, also from Seville
<i>Vincent d'Olargues</i>	Judge and Mathieu's acquaintance on the train
<i>Psychologist</i>	The dwarf who listens to Mathieu on the train

<i>Mother</i>	Parisian woman who also listens to the story on the train
<i>Isabelle</i>	The curious girl on the train
<i>Édouard Faber</i>	Judge who is Mathieu's cousin and confidant
<i>El Morenito</i>	The young Sevillian thief who is also (possibly) Conchita's lover
<i>Martin</i>	Mathieu's valet

SYNOPSIS

The film begins and ends with a huge explosion. After the first explosion, we are introduced to Mathieu, an older Parisian who is boarding a train from Seville to Madrid (with a connection to Paris). When he dumps a bucket of water on young woman pursuing him on the platform, the other passengers in his berth insist that he explain his actions. One passenger, a dwarf psychologist, says that he would like to analyze Mathieu.

As the train pulls away, Mathieu tells the story of his tempestuous relationship with a young Sevillian dancer named Conchita. The majority of the film is a series of flashbacks that show the couple's first meeting in a Parisian home and ends with their violent confrontation in a house in Seville. Mathieu recounts how they kept finding each other in Paris, yet Conchita refused to have intercourse with him. When Conchita and her mother are deported to Seville, Mathieu follows. However, Mathieu soon discovers that Conchita is not just a flamenco dancer on the main stage, but also dances privately, nude, for international tourists. The two keep breaking up and making up until Mathieu buys Conchita a house in Seville. Even then, Conchita locks him out and taunts him by (possibly) having sex with her companion Morenito in front of the patio gate. This cruelty leads to Mathieu beating up Conchita the next morning.

When the train arrives in Madrid, Mathieu realizes that Conchita boarded the train behind him and is about to dump water on his head. The passengers disembark, and Conchita and Mathieu leave together. The last scene takes place in a Parisian mall where Mathieu tries to hold and caress Conchita, but she rebuffs him. The film ends abruptly with a huge explosion.

SCENES

Leaving Seville The first scene shows foot traffic on the busy streets of Seville, tall palm trees, the Corte español, a mall in downtown Seville and hear flamenco guitar playing. Mathieu gets out of a car and enter a travel agency. He asks for a sleeper ticket with bed from Seville to Paris, but the agent can only book him two trips: one to Madrid on the following day, and the second on to Paris. Mathieu returns to his house in Seville, and his valet informs him that "she" has just left. They enter the living room and assess the damage, including a bloody pillow, broken trinkets, and wet woman's underwear. Mathieu tells Martin to burn everything and pack for Paris. The valet replies that he will be relieved to eat something besides steak cooked in oil.



First Bomb A car with a chauffeur waiting outside an embassy. A distinguished gentleman gets in the back. As soon as the chauffer starts the car, a huge explosion engulfs the vehicle in flames. Mathieu and his valet are in another car, and they get out, startled. Mathieu remarks: "It's happening here, too," but they quickly regain their composure and continue on to the train station.



The Train Berth When Mathieu gets to his seat, he chats with a young woman and her daughter Isabelle. The mother recognizes Mathieu as a neighbor from her street in Paris. Another gentleman boards, and Mathieu recognizes him from the Parisian courthouse. The two realize that they know each other through Mathieu's cousin Édouard Faubert, an esteemed judge. The gentleman reports that he is also a judge and his name is Vincent d'Olargues. They get settled in their seat when another passenger, a well-dressed little person, enters. Isabelle tries to help him get into his seat, but the dwarf replies that he can manage. We



do not hear the names of the little person or the mother, but Vincent remarks that he saw the dwarf at the bullfights the night before.

Drenching Conchita Conchita (CB) arrives on the platform with a bandage on her forehead and a black eye. She scans the platform for Mathieu, and the entire berth, including Mathieu, sees her wandering around. Mathieu pays the train attendant to fetch him a bucket. When Conchita sees him pulling away on the train, she cries out “You can’t leave like this.” He dumps the bucket of water over her and returns to his seat. Conchita grabs onto the handle and pulls herself onto the train in the next berth (without Mathieu seeing her).



Passengers’ Curiosity Mathieu returns to his seat and acts as if nothing happened. Isabelle asks him why he drenched the woman, and her mother scolds her for being impolite. The adult passengers also start to ask questions, although Vincent is particularly uncomfortable. The little person probes more directly and explains that he is a psychologist and fascinated by Mathieu’s behavior. Mathieu agrees to tell everyone the story.



Meeting at the Hotel The camera cuts to Édouard’s house where the two go for lunch. Édouard is particularly excited about the food and asks to see its preparation. When Édouard goes exploring, Mathieu meets Conchita. She (CB) enters in a maid outfit, and Mathieu asks her about her background. She replies that she is Spanish, and he compliments the quality of her French. Later on Conchita (CB) helps to serve lunch, Mathieu notices that her hands are delicate and unblemished. He reports to his fellow guests that Conchita is obviously not an experienced servant.



Sexual Harassment in the Hotel Room When Conchita (AM) enters his hotel room with a tray, Mathieu asks her about her life. She reports that she is a dancer from Seville who has tried working several jobs but always quits. She also explains that her father is dead and her mother spends all her days at church. Mathieu pulls her onto his lap and strokes her hair, commenting on its silky texture. He also kisses her temple, but Conchita pulls away. She leaves, flustered. Mathieu sits on the hotel bed and throws a pillow, frustrated. The next morning, the valet Martin reports that Conchita left without word and without payment.



Encounters in the Swiss Park A few months later, Mathieu is walking in a Swiss park during a business trip. Three young Spaniards mug him but only ask for 800 francs. When they leave with the money, Mathieu thinks about telling a passing cop, but decides to let it go. He sits down at an outdoor café and drinks coffee. Conchita (CB) shows up suddenly and explains that it was her friends who mugged him. Mathieu tells her to keep the money even though she tries to give it back. She declares that she will go home and give the money to her mother. Mathieu asks for her address and she obliges.



First Visit to the Apartment Mathieu shows up at Conchita’s shabby apartment and meets her mother, Encarnación Pérez. They invite him in for coffee, and Conchita’s mother explains their predicament: Conchita’s father committed suicide and left them with nothing. Moreover, Conchita has to make money since she does not have any skills. Mathieu gives them more cash, and Encarnación thanks him and leaves the apartment. Conchita invites Mathieu to sit on the couch with him after her mother leaves. She acts flirtatiously but also tells Mathieu to leave if he is only after sex. Then, she asks him to retrieve a macramé box from the shelf. She proceeds to open the box and feed Mathieu a hard candy. The camera cuts to the train berth at night, where the passengers are straining to hear Mathieu over the tracks. Mathieu admits that he was entranced and kept visiting Conchita’s apartment every day.



Flamenco Seduction During one visit to the apartment, Mathieu walks in on Conchita (AM) dancing while El Morenito plays the guitar. Mathieu watches from the doorway and applauds the performance. When El Morenito leaves, Mathieu touches her cleavage and notices that she is sweating. They continue chatting while Conchita strips down to her underwear and washes off the sweat in the sink. Mathieu gives her an old-fashioned purse, and Conchita says that her mother would like it. Mathieu comes up from behind and caresses Conchita's breast.



More Couch Foreplay Conchita sings a Spanish ditty and touches Mathieu's face, then translates the lyrics into French. The song is about inviting someone to be your lover, and Mathieu asks if the song is true. They go over to the couch, and Conchita sits on Mathieu's lap. She kisses him passionately, and he slides his hand up her leg. Conchita protests, but Mathieu retorts that she was the one who initiated petting. Conchita reasserts that she is not like other girls and she knows what Mathieu is after (and that he doesn't really love her). Conchita's mother enters and greets Mathieu. She goes on a rant about purity and chastity, proclaiming that she and Conchita are as "straight as St. John's finger." She also complains that some girls hold the rosary but have the devil in their skirts.

Conchita is a mocita Mathieu guides Conchita from the couch and a little away from her mother. In a whisper, he asks if her resistance to sex has to do with a fear of sinning. Conchita answers no, but admits that she is "una mocita"—literally, a little girl. When Mathieu asks for clarification, she explains that she is a virgin. Mathieu kisses her hand affectionately.



Mathieu's Proposition Martin, Mathieu's valet, meets Conchita's mother after mass and brings her to Mathieu's apartment. Mathieu declares his love for Conchita and vows to take care of them both financially. Conchita's mother asks if Mathieu wants to marry her daughter, and he answers: "Not now—maybe later." He asks Conchita's mother to bring her to him and to convince her daughter of his sincerity. Conchita's mother takes the offered money and agrees to bring Conchita over the next day.

Conchita Leaves The next day, Mathieu and Martin are arranging the apartment for Conchita's arrival. Mathieu places white roses in the bedroom, and Martin brings in a small television. The valet warns that the device dulls the mind, so Mathieu tells him to get rid of it. When the doorbell rings, Mathieu grabs a red rose to greet his lover. El Morenito enters and hands Mathieu a letter from Conchita. In the letter, Conchita says she will never see Mathieu again since he tried to "buy" her. Mathieu goes over to Conchita's apartment and discovers that they have moved overnight.

At the Restaurant After the rejection, Mathieu meets his cousin Édouard at a nice restaurant. He bemoans the break-up, and Édouard suggests that he sleep with another young woman to get over her. Mathieu retorts that he usually only has sex when he is deeply in love. The waiter brings them a martini but notices that a fly has drowned in the glass; he leaves to get them fresh drinks. Édouard surmises that Conchita was a gold-digger, but Mathieu says that she could have taken him for much more money, so that probably wasn't her motivation. Édouard goes to the coat check and realizes that Conchita (CB) is the new coat check girl. He leaves so that Mathieu and Conchita can reunite. Conchita's boss chides her for talking to the customers, so she quits on the spot. Her boss refuses to serve the couple, and they leave the restaurant.



Reconciliation After some probing, Conchita (CB) explains to Mathieu that she left him because she was offended and that she worked as a model to survive. Mathieu replies that she should have just told him: "I won't be bought" and they could have worked it out. Conchita asks about Mathieu's country house and says "I will be your mistress there." Mathieu asks excitedly: "Tonight?" and she replies: "Tomorrow night."



Tryst at the Country House The couple pull up at the country house and notice that the power is out. The chauffeur reports that there has been yet another terrorist attack, this time on the power plant. Mathieu and Conchita (AM) go inside and start kissing in the master bedroom. However, when Conchita sees the photo of Mathieu's late wife, she insists on changing rooms. She also professes her love for Mathieu. He replies that he will love her till the end. When they move to the newly made-up guest room, Conchita goes into the bathroom to change. She (now suddenly changed to Carole Bouquet) emerges in a white nightgown with her breasts exposed, and the viewer sees her semi-naked body through the reflection of a floor-length mirror.

Still no Sex Mathieu caresses Conchita (CB) from behind while she fishes for compliments about her body. Conchita suddenly claims she is not in the mood, and Mathieu, infuriated, starts grabbing and shaking her. After some force, they get into bed together, and Mathieu blows out the candle. He starts caressing her breasts and stomach, saying that he has waited too long. Conchita remarks that he shouldn't declare victory yet. When he arrives at her pelvis, he notices that she is wearing strange underwear. When he turns on the light, Mathieu realizes that Conchita is wearing medieval-style breeches with corset-like ties on the side. When Conchita refuses to take them off, Mathieu claws at the underwear but is unable to rip them or untie them. The camera cuts to the train where the passengers are listening intently and Mathieu recounts his amazement and frustration at the breeches. The camera cuts back to the bedroom, where Mathieu is crying and Conchita consoles him, saying that if he is patient, it will happen— "little by little."



Lovers' Stroll The camera cuts to a shot of the train tracks and the train speeding by. A few days later, Mathieu and Conchita (AM) are strolling along the Seine. Conchita takes a touristy picture of Mathieu and asks him if he would like a better camera. Suddenly, Conchita asks why Mathieu insists on sex given that he has access to her mouth, legs, and breasts. Mathieu replies that it is normal. Conchita retorts that she loves him but doesn't want sex. They walk arm and arm down a tree-lined sidewalk.



Another Frustrating Night Conchita (CB) and Mathieu get in bed together yet again at his Parisian apartment. Mathieu knows not to try to have intercourse, but he asks Conchita again how long she will make him wait. Conchita replies that as soon as she gives him sex, he will lose interest. However, she climbs on top of him naked. Mathieu suggests that there are "other ways" to please a man without losing one's virginity. Conchita gets offended and gets off of him. They hear a crash outside and run to the window. There is an exchange of gun fire, and one man is shot in the back. Conchita gets frightened and declares that she won't stay, and Mathieu kicks her out of the room, furious.

Sneaking Out Conchita (now AM) creeps down the hall of Mathieu's apartment with El Morenito, whom she has been hiding in her room. When they break a vase, Mathieu knocks on Conchita's door, but she tries to stall so that El Morenito can hide. Mathieu climbs up on a ladder and sees Conchita hiding a guitar under her bed. When Conchita lets him in, he finds El Morenito behind the couch and throws him out. Conchita says that he was staying with her but that they did not have sex, and Mathieu throws out Conchita, too. Conchita swears never to return and warns Mathieu not to ask her back.



Obsession A few days later, Mathieu meets with Édouard and explains the recent break-up. Mathieu admits that he is obsessed with Conchita, and he begs his cousin to help keep him away from her. Édouard agrees reluctantly, but recommends that Mathieu travel someplace far away.

Notice of Deportation Conchita (CB) and her mother receive a letter of deportation delivered by immigration police. The letter deems them undesirable aliens who must return to Seville by morning. When they leave town, Mathieu vows to get on with his life and travel someplace random—like Singapore. The camera cuts to the train, where the dwarf psychologist asserts that he did not follow his own resolutions, but rather followed Conchita to Seville. Mathieu admits that he is correct.



Tourist in Seville While looking for Conchita, Mathieu and his valet Martin wander around the city and visit various tourist spots. When they walk through a courtyard of a cathedral with Arabic (Mozarab) designs, a pair of gypsy fortune tellers approach them. One holds a swaddled piglet and the other reads Mathieu. She reports that he is rich but has mistreated a woman who loves him. Mathieu smiles and gives a few coins to the woman holding the piglet. Mathieu asks Martin to tell him a little about himself, and they end up talking about women. Martin says that a womanizer friend of his calls women “sacks of excrement.” Mathieu asks why but doesn’t get an answer. The camera cuts to Mathieu leaving his rental house at night, where a worker hands him a sack that he “forgot.”



Chance Encounter in Seville Mathieu is wandering around the city and watches a procession of nuns walking along the street. Suddenly, Conchita (AM) calls out from behind a gate, and Mathieu is amazed that he found her randomly. They catch up, and Conchita reports that she is dancing in a nearby club. She invites Mathieu to watch her, and he says yes. Mathieu kisses her hand and Conchita turns her head so that Mathieu can stroke and smell her hair through the bars of the gate.

Tempestuous Night at the Club Mathieu enters the club and sits down at a table next to fellow employees. He watches Conchita (AM) and the other professionals dance the flamenco. When the performance ends, Conchita tells Mathieu that she must take a break, as they require that the dancers take short naps during their shift. When Conchita leaves to go upstairs, one of her fellow employees introduces herself to Mathieu. She indicates that he looks younger than Conchita’s description, and she mentions that Conchita called him naïve. The fellow employee realizes that Mathieu believed Conchita’s lie about a nap, and she laughs sarcastically. The employee prompts Mathieu to go upstairs and see the truth for himself.



Nude Dancing Mathieu climbs the stairs and approach a glass door to an adjoining dining room and stage. When he looks through the door, he sees Conchita (AM) dancing naked in front of a group of Chinese tourists. He watches for a few seconds, then bursts in, enraged. Mathieu confronts Conchita and yells for the tourists to get out. Conchita says that she acts for herself and that Mathieu has never understood her. She asserts that it is she who is chasing Mathieu’s love and not the other way around. Mathieu demands that she quit the club, and Conchita asks for a small house and a stipend to replace her dancing salary. Mathieu agrees.



Teasing at the New House Conchita (CB) is living at the new house in Seville. When Mathieu visits for the first time, he gives Conchita the deed to the house and the key to the outside gate. She claims that she is very happy and that her mother will not live with her. Conchita suggests that she will “greet” Mathieu at midnight, but when he embraces her, she amends her promise: “come tomorrow night at midnight.”



Sadistic Performance At midnight the following evening, Conchita (AM) greets Mathieu as he approaches the gate from the outside. She shows him that she has the key and laughs sadistically from the patio on the other side of the gate. She proceeds to insult him and claim that she is revolted by his touch and spits after every kiss. Then, she fetches El Morenito and leads him to the patio in front of the gate—there, they kiss and lay down a blanket. She declares him her lover, disrobes, and mounts El Morenito in front of Mathieu. Mathieu is too pained to watch, but he stays by the gate for a few seconds, then walks away. When he returns, Conchita taunts him further. She declares: “My guitar is mine; I play it when I please.”



Thieves or Terrorists? There is a blurred fade to the night lights and traffic as Mathieu is driven to his rental home. The driver sees a man lying in the street, so he stops the car to go check on him. Once the driver bends over the man, he springs up and clubs him on the head. Mathieu gets out of the car to intervene but is threatened by another man with an automatic weapon. Mathieu backs away slowly and walks home as the men steal the car and drive away. Conchita (CB) suddenly appears and picks roses from a nearby bush. She approaches Mathieu and ask him why he didn't kill himself. He motions that she should follow him inside.

Morning Beating When they enter the bedroom, Conchita (now changed to Ángela Molina) chides Matthieu for thinking that he owns her just because he bought her a house. Matthieu starts slapping her, and she tries to avoid the beating while saying “You'll never have me.” When Mathieu pushes her down, she looks up at Mathieu, wipes the blood from her nose, and says “Now I know that you love me.” She claims that she is still a virgin and that she only pretended to have intercourse with El Morenito. Conchita crawls to Mathieu and gives him the key to the gate. Mathieu walks out and throws the key back at her.



Conchita's Revenge The camera cuts back to the train berth where Mathieu explains that Conchita had it coming. He reports that the beating took place yesterday morning. Suddenly, Conchita (AM) appears with her own bucket and dumps water on the seated Mathieu. The camera cuts to a shot of the passengers disembarking—minus Conchita and Mathieu. We see an exterior shot of the Madrid train station and Mathieu getting into the car with Conchita.

Back in Paris: Repaired Lace The camera cuts to a shot of the star in downtown Paris, and we see Mathieu and Conchita (CB) walking on the sidewalk. They enter a shopping mall. Over the speakers, a voice reports the news about a series of new terrorist attacks led by the RABJ, including a bombing in Siena that gravely injured an Italian archbishop. Mathieu stops in front of a clothing store where several white articles of clothing (and what appears to be a wedding trousseau) are displayed. A woman sits and sews up a lace pattern, even though the fabric has a bright red blood stain on it. The camera zooms in on the needle darting in and out of the lace. Mathieu watches intently while caressing Conchita's hand. She pulls away and walks away, and Mathieu follows her. When Conchita turns to look back, we see that the last shot of her face is that of Ángela Molina.



Another Bomb Suddenly, there is an enormous explosion. The whole frame is filled with billowing smoke.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

MATHIEU

Mathieu is the distinguished French gentleman who pursues Conchita. He is a well-travelled member of the bourgeoisie. His obsession with the object of his desire is his defining characteristic.

Lustful From the first moment he meets her, Mathieu is obsessed with and drawn to Conchita. Although he suggests that he only likes to sleep with women whom he loves, he also lusts after Conchita in every scene, whether she is sitting, dancing, serving, or washing herself.

Frustrated Mathieu can't comprehend Conchita's motivations and wants. At times he feels as though she is using him for money, and at times he thinks that she actually loves him (or is at least attracted to him). The constant seduction followed by rejection eventually drives Mathieu to violence and a sort of insanity.

Distinguished Mathieu seems to be a cultured member of the bourgeoisie. He travels extensively and regularly eats in nice restaurants. He also has enough money to act as Conchita's sugar daddy.

CONCHITA

Conchita is a young, beautiful dancer from Seville. Her personality is an enigma, however, because of her changing behavior, lying, and contradictory statements.

Manipulative Conchita constantly arouses Matthieu and rejects him. The most extreme example of this contradictory behavior is when Conchita gets into bed naked with Mathieu, mounts him, but then refuses sex. When it seems like the relationship is over, she reels him back in or pretends to reconcile with him when he initiates contact. When Mathieu finds her in Seville, Conchita claims that she missed Mathieu and suggests that they have a long-term relationship.

Rebellious Conchita frequently declares her autonomy, but the nature of her rebellion changes depending upon the circumstances. With Matthieu, her rebellion takes the form of guarding her supposed virginity above all and rejecting his advances. She also rebels against society, the Church, and her mother by dancing naked in the flamenco club and facilitating the muggings in the park.

Mysterious Along with her beauty and foreign charm, Conchita is an enigma. She vacillates between coquettishness and eroticism and kindness and sadism. Neither Mathieu nor the viewer know how to read her. When Conchita suggests that she become Mathieu's mistress at the country house, she arouses him by exposing her breasts and saying she loves him, yet she hides the medieval and impenetrable breaches under her nightgown. She allows Mathieu to caress her top half but never gives him access to her vagina. In Seville, Conchita says that she loves Mathieu at least three times, but when she locks him out of the house, she says that she despises him and loathes his touch.

MARTIN

Martin is Mathieu's faithful valet who works for him throughout his turbulent relationship with Conchita. Although he is not fully fleshed out as a character, Martin does provide gravitas in significant moments in the film's trajectory.

Practical As Mathieu's servant, Martin knows how to adapt to his boss's moods and desires. He helps to prepare for Conchita's arrival and helps to clean up the literal and figurative mess after each break up. When Conchita does not move in with Mathieu in Paris, Martin remarks that he is not surprised. He is also adept at assisting Mathieu with his frequent travelling.

Wise Martin shows wisdom in his remarks about life, love, and technology. He understands fine French cooking, and he also astutely observes that television "dulls the brain." When Mathieu asks him about his philosophy on women, Martin jokes that his friend thinks of women as "bags of excrement." While this description does not constitute wisdom, it does underscore Martin's understanding of his boss's depression and his need to vent.

THEMES

RELATIONSHIPS

Sexuality

Desire The entire film is centered on Mathieu's obsessive and unquenched desire for Conchita, hence the film's title. Although Mathieu manages to kiss, caress, and look at Conchita's body repeatedly, she always denies him intercourse and oral sex. It could be said, then, that the object of the title refers most explicitly to Conchita's vagina, although there is also the interpretation of the "object" as Conchita's affection, love, or spirit. Mathieu lacks an emotional or physical release, so the desire is recycled in a repetitive pattern throughout the film. It is likely that Conchita also experiences desire, but neither Mathieu nor the viewer can ascertain what the young dancer truly feels. She expresses a yearning for autonomy and agency, but she also implies that she is physically attracted to both Mathieu and El Morenito. In one of the apartment scenes, Conchita insists that she is the one who loves and pursues Mathieu, not the other way around. The Sevillian gypsies seem to concur when they read Mathieu's fortune in front of the cathedral. The implication is that Conchita craves affection, attention, and power, but not necessarily sex. It could be argued that Conchita desires freedom or perpetual purity—if, in fact, she is a virgin. Her name, short for Concepción, alludes to Mary's immaculate conception. Perhaps she aspires to be as pure as her name suggests.

Sadomasochism At its core, the relationship between Mathieu and Conchita is sadomasochistic: they continually hurt each other both emotionally and physically, yet both keep coming back to the toxic relationship and vicious cycle. Although Conchita's motivations for maintaining her chastity are not always clear, she overtly engages in sadistic behavior towards Mathieu. Her typical game is to flatter, arouse, or titillate Mathieu, then suddenly pull away. We see this pattern emerge in an early scene in which she initiates contact with Mathieu by sitting on his lap and kissing him, then she takes offence when he strokes her leg. The teasing becomes more extreme when Conchita gets naked and even mounts Mathieu. Of course, her most sadistic behavior is humping El Morenito in front of Mathieu. Because he cannot stay away from her, Mathieu has a masochistic tendency—that is, until he explodes in anger and lashes out. As film critic Peter William Evans so cleverly puts it, Mathieu is "cursed by recidivism". In some ways, Conchita is also a masochist in that she puts herself in the position to be victimized. She knows that the relationship is toxic, yet she initiates contact and follows Mathieu to Paris with a black eye. Her job as a stripper-dancer suggests that she enjoys being objectified while also wielding erotic power, and she repeats this titillation with Mathieu on multiple occasions.

Fetishism The most overt fetish in the film is Conchita's vagina—it is there but exists only as the titular object of desire, or "obscure" concept that is never attained. Mathieu's ceaseless pursuit of the "object" reflects what Lacan described as the lack—the missing part (usually a phallus) that all individuals crave. Mathieu's psychological obsession with the vagina and penetration is illustrated by his frantic clawing at Conchita's "medieval" underwear and his rapt appraisal of the seamstress repairing the lace in the storefront window. At times, Conchita is broken up into erotic body parts where the focus is on her hair, breasts, legs, hands, or feet. Mathieu strokes Conchita's hair when they are first alone together, and Conchita offers her hair to Mathieu when they are first reunited in Seville. When the lovers are walking on the street, Conchita argues that sex is not necessary given that Mathieu has access to her mouth, breasts, and legs. Her seductive dancing underscores the focus on various body parts, even when she is fully clothed. A good example of this framing occurs when Conchita is rehearsing her flamenco routine in the apartment. The camera zooms in on her feet, and Mathieu touches her cleavage and remarks that she is sweating. Beyond Conchita's body parts, *That Obscure Object of Desire* does not shy away from investing objects with erotic meaning. Buñuel marks the flashbacks to the love story by cutting to the train in motion. Although it does not go into a dark tunnel, the shots of the train could still be interpreted as phallic. At the end of the film, Mathieu stops to watch a woman sewing up a blood-stained, white, fabric and repairing the lace pattern. The act of sewing, especially with the close-ups on the needle moving in and out of the fabric, remind Mathieu of his longing for penetration. The blood could allude to either the terrorist violence, the violence of the relationship, or refer to Conchita's lost virginity. In any case, Mathieu's gaze creates an erotic aura around the act of sewing.

LIFE STAGES

Youth Conchita and her musician-thief companions are the epitome of youth, and Conchita even states explicitly that she is eighteen. They are thin, attractive, and vibrant with muscles and silky hair. Conchita's willingness to show her body (either in her underwear or completely nude) underscores her youthful beauty and confidence, and also a bit of naivete. Although the young dancer is quite seductive, she also guards her own virginity as a symbol of her youthfulness (and of course, as a bargaining chip and power play). Conchita's youth is also flaunted with her dancing ability—she is able to rehearse continuously and expresses herself with grace and vitality. Although she claims that she prefers older people to young, stupid men, she also praises El Morenito's tight body. In some respects, Mathieu is also framed as young in spirit. His obsession, anger, and strong sex drive seem to be that of a younger man, and the dancers at the flamenco club also comment on his naivete—specifically, that he believes Conchita when she claims to be napping upstairs.

Old Age As foils to the Sevillian dancers and musicians, Mathieu and his companions epitomize both the stability and the foibles of old age. Despite his overall vitality, Mathieu worries that he is too old for Conchita and that she is using him for his money. At times, Conchita suggests that she doesn't care about old age, yet she also rubs in the fact that he can never "have" her fully. Mathieu seems to be worldly and experienced, yet he also admits to his brother Édouard that he usually only sleeps with women when he is passionately in love with them. His age shows up more distinctly in his relationship with Conchita, as he often takes the role of Don Juan conquering new territory. Or, perhaps more frequently, Mathieu becomes a father figure who advises, scolds, and supports Conchita. When he fails in both roles, Mathieu becomes another feeble old man bested by his daughter-lover. This pattern is repeated often in several Buñuel films, and the aging Don Juan is played by Fernando Rey several times.

PHILOSOPHY

Performativity and Metafilm As with many of Buñuel's films in the last third of his career, the director and his crew draw the viewer's attention to the elements and machinations of filming. The most explicit and repeated form of metafilm is the use of two actresses for the same role. The viewer is unable to get lost in the world of the film because the object of Mathieu's desire keeps changing. When the couple go back to Mathieu's country house to have an affair, Conchita (played by Ángela Molina) goes into the bathroom and says that she wants to change. A few moments later, Caroline Bouquet emerges and proceeds to expose her breasts. We then see Bouquet's body through the mirror rather than through Mathieu's male gaze. These moments of double and triple vision remind the viewer that she is watching a film and participating in the erotic voyeurism of the bedroom scenes. This film also features performances within the film: we see Conchita rehearsing and performing her flamenco routines, and we watch Mathieu watch the tourists watch Conchita dancing nude on stage at the flamenco club. Even though each dance performance is enacted by Molina (and not Bouquet), the viewer is reminded that they are watching a performance within a performance. Moreover, the overall story itself is relayed through the flashbacks—Mathieu is telling the story after the fact to the rapt "audience" on the train. We can assume that he performs his own version of the narrative.

POLITICS

Power Politically, there is a consistent battle for control of the government / society throughout the film. Buñuel and Carrière write political violence into each destination in Mathieu's life. Even at his country estate, the power is out due to a terrorist attack. We do not learn the context of the terrorist groups' demands—only that they are willing to murder civilians in order to oust prominent leaders. Buñuel and Carrière seem to underscore the fruitlessness of this strategy while also acknowledging various injustices or social problems throughout Europe. With respect to the power dynamic in the relationship, it would appear that Conchita holds all of the cards. She withholds intercourse (specifically, her vagina) as a bargaining chip in order to manipulate Mathieu. She continually arouses him, she rejects him, and he always comes to find her. It is usually Conchita who breaks up with Mathieu, and it is Mathieu who attempts to reinitiate the relationship when they see each other again. Moreover, Mathieu continues to support Conchita and her mother financially despite the young dancer's behavior. On the other hand, Mathieu has a power advantage due to his gender, age, and status. He can use his wealth to support Conchita and her mother—both are poor immigrants who live an unstable life. If he were not so

obsessed with Conchita, Mathieu could easily abandon his young lover and leave her (and her mother) to their own devices. Conchita predicts several times that Mathieu will leave her once she has sex with him, and perhaps she is correct.

Terrorism There are five big terrorist attacks in the film: the car explosion in the first scene, the St. Damian bombing, the attack on the power plant, the near-assassination of the Archbishop of Siena, and the presumed blowing up of the Parisian shopping mall at the very end. Another early scene references the trial of some of the bombers, who get off with only a few years of prison time. Symbolically, the explosions could represent the disastrous state of the romantic relationship between Conchita and Mathieu or the explosion of Mathieu's rage and sexual frustration. However, there is a discussion of the threat of actual and specific terrorism throughout the film, including the scenes in which Mathieu is listening to the news on the radio. The viewer learns that there are several different terrorist groups bombing various sites in Europe, but perhaps the most infamous is the so-called RABJ—The Revolutionary Army of the Baby Jesus. While this name is clearly meant to satirize religious fanaticism, Buñuel may also be commenting on the terrorist factions that bombed and attacked cities in Europe in the 1960s and 1970s, such as ETA in Spain or the IRA in Ireland and England.

FLAWS

Obsession Matthieu is always chasing the object of his desire—not just intercourse, but also the sincere love and affection of Conchita. Rather than leave her for good, Mathieu cannot help but go back to the pursuit over and over. Even his escape on the train cannot detach him from Conchita. Conversely, Conchita has her own obsession with power and chastity. She uses her supposed virginity as a bargaining chip, but she is also caught up in the idea of remaining pure for herself. This yearning for purity is undercut by her stripping and sadistic teasing, yet she still holds onto an almost Platonic conception of virginity. The erotic obsessions of the main characters find a parallel in the fanaticism of the terrorist organizations. The political obsession leads to destruction and death, as reported in the news throughout the film.

JUSTICE

Violence There are two parallel threads of violence throughout the film: the violence that is the climax or relief of the tension between Mathieu and Conchita, and the constant terrorist attacks and political violence that often connect one relationship scene to the next. When Mathieu can no longer contain his frustration, he acts violently towards Conchita—shaking her, throwing her on the bed, and trying to rip off her clothes. One of the most violent scenes of the film is Conchita's beating, and this interpersonal violence marks a key moment in the film's trajectory. The violence of the scene is underscored by Conchita's wounds, blood, and bruises. However, Buñuel and Carrière also provide a subtler "soundtrack" of political and social violence throughout the film. There are the explosions (presumably terrorist bombings), two car hijackings with automatic weapons, and numerous news reports and descriptions of other terrorist attacks and wars. Often, Mathieu acts as a witness to violence in real time: he sees his driver beaten by the hijackers, and he and Conchita watch another shooting from their balcony. Although he is disturbed in the moment, the action returns quickly to his obsession with Conchita generally and sex specifically.

Crime The terrorist attacks and hijackings constitute the crimes that keep repeating throughout the film. The viewer reads and hears the horrific statistics of death and destruction through Mathieu's consumption of the news on the radio and in the newspaper, respectively. Along with the chaos created by the terrorist attacks, there is also the attempt to bring the criminals to justice. Two characters are judges who sentence the terrorists. However, the trial of the RABJ in the beginning of the film does not lead to satisfactory punishment—at least according to Édouard. The implication is that the world, including Buñuel himself, has become inured to constant violence and terrorism. Even at the very end of the film, the mall visitors hear the news about the RABJ's attempted assassination of the archbishop but go about their shopping. The final frame interrupts the relationship drama with one last, devastating attack in the form of explosion.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Conchita's motivations remain unclear throughout the film. Does she really love Mathieu, or is she using him for money, or does she just enjoy the cat and mouse game, or is she refusing to be a sex object?
2. What is the effect of using two actresses to play Conchita? NOTE: In various interviews, Buñuel claimed that he did not pick certain scenes to go with each actress. He did say that he made sure the screen time was equal between the two actresses.
3. How does the action in Paris and Switzerland differ from the action in Seville?
4. What is the purpose of the continuous terrorist attacks throughout the film? Are the terrorist attacks metaphors for Conchita and Mathieu's relationship?
5. What is the meaning of the title? What is the "object"?
6. What is the effect of the flamenco guitar, costumes, and dancing? What are some other elements of Andalusian "flavor" in the film?