

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE EXTERMINATING ANGEL / El ángel exterminador (1962) 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 title priest attempts to administer to a rural Mexican community, as well as the featured film of this essay, *The Exterminating Angel*. 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 *El ángel exterminador* (1962) is a black and white film set principally in a luxurious home in Mexico City. Unlike other films of his middle period, the plot for *Ángel* was not based on Spanish or French literature but rather was a conceptual invention of Buñuel himself. The director also wrote the screenplay. As with many of Buñuel's films made in Mexico, *Ángel* was produced by Gustavo Altariste. Silvia Pinal, Buñuel's Mexican muse, played the key part of Leticia.

Background Due to a long exile in Mexico, Buñuel's films in the 1940s and 1950s (and early 1960s) were often shot in and around Mexico City. *El ángel exterminador* was no exception: it was filmed in the Churubusco Studio in Mexico City. The film won several small awards after being featured in the 1962 Cannes Film Festival. *Ángel* is considered one of Buñuel's masterworks and a highly influential avant-garde film of the 1960s, hence its inclusion in the famed Criterion Collection. In particular, Buñuel's eerie surrealist images and editing created several horror tropes that are still used to this day.

CHARACTERS

<i>Lucía Nóbile</i>	The gracious hostess of the party
<i>Edmundo Nóbile</i>	Lucía's husband and host of the party
<i>Álvaro Aranda</i>	The colonel who is having a secret affair with Lucía
<i>Leandro</i>	The man visiting from New York
<i>Blanca</i>	The guest who plays the piano
<i>Leticia</i>	The guest known as the Valkyrie who breaks the spell
<i>Carlos Conde</i>	The guest who is a doctor and administers to the other sick guests
<i>Leonora</i>	Dr. Conde's patient with cancer
<i>Sergio Russell</i>	The old guest who is the first to die
<i>Cristián Ugalde</i>	Guest who is a Freemason and has ulcers
<i>Rita Ugalde</i>	Cristián's pregnant wife
<i>Alberto de Roc</i>	Elderly orchestra conductor
<i>Alicia de Roc</i>	Alberto's young wife
<i>Beatriz</i>	Eduardo's fiancée
<i>Eduardo</i>	Beatriz's fiancée
<i>Silvia</i>	The opera singer
<i>Francisco Ávila</i>	The disgruntled young man

<i>Juana Ávila</i>	Francisco's overprotective sister
<i>Raúl</i>	The older scholar with a cane
<i>Ana Maynar</i>	The woman who was in a terrible trainwreck
<i>Julio</i>	The mayordomo who brings in food but is trapped

SYNOPSIS

A group of upper middle-class friends attend a fancy dinner at the house of Edmundo and Lucía Nóbile after an opera performance. The guests enjoy dinner and conversation in the dining room, then they adjourn to the parlor. Instead of leaving, they all stay the night.

The next morning, the guests are disoriented and prepare to leave, but they find themselves unable to physically walk out of the parlor space. Thus begins a survivalist nightmare in which all twenty guests have to coexist in the parlor for an indefinite amount of time. A handful of guests fall ill quickly, with one man dying almost immediately. Other guests use philosophy and hygienic activities to keep their sanity, and some guests take more aggressive measures to find food and water.

After days and perhaps weeks have passed, Leticia, one of the more sagacious guests, realizes that the living guests are sitting and standing in the same positions as the night of the banquet. Leticia orchestrates a repetition of the 3:00 AM party activities and dialogue, and this repeat performance breaks the spell.

The camera cuts to a church in which several of the surviving houseguests are attending mass. When the mass ends, the priests and parishioners find themselves incapable of exiting the church. The film ends with church bells ringing, a riot in the plaza with gunshots, and a flock of sheep running into the front entrance of the church.

SCENES

Location The shot behind the opening credits is the church door with the Baroque-style tympanum. When the credits end, there is a close-up on the street sign—Calle de Providencia, or Providence Street—and provides an establishing shot of the street and the outside gate to the house.



Lucas Leaves Julio, the mayordomo, stops one of the servants, Lucas, as he walks out of the gate. Julio reminds him that twenty guests are arriving, and Lucas says he only wanted to talk a quick walk. Julio lets him go but tells him he's fired.

Other servants Leave When Julio returns to the dining room, he asks the other servants if there was a conflict with Lucas, but no one has a good answer. Julio continues on to the kitchen where several servants are preparing the banquet. They discuss the order of the courses, and the cooks comment that the weather may be dangerous. The chef suggests that they carpool once they have finished preparations. The female cooks sneak out even though the dinner is not yet complete.

The Servants Sneak Out Julio agrees. When Lucía enters the kitchen, she catches the chef and his assistant leaving. The chef explains that his sister is ill, but Lucía does not believe them and fires them on the spot. Julio remarks that domestic help is becoming more insolent, and Lucía tells Julio that he must serve with the remaining servants. As soon as they leave, however, more servants sneak into the kitchen and plan their escape.

Animals roaming around the house Lucía enters the mayordomo's room and warns Julio that Sergio Russell cannot abide practical jokes. We see a small bear cub on a leash. She demands that Julio take it out to the garden, along with several sheep that are milling around under the table.



Mr. Russel doesn't like jokes.

Visitors Arrive The guests, all dressed in tuxedos and elegant dresses, walk into the foyer after dinner. Lucas is not there to take their wraps and coats, so they continue up the stairs to the dining table. This scene is repeated twice. Once the guests actually get upstairs, the remaining servants serve the first course. Edmundo toasts Silvia for her operatic performance of the “Virgin Bride of Lammermoor,” then toasts again. The others scoff saying that Silvia is hardly a virgin, whereas Leticia is both “ferocious and a virgin”—hence her nickname, Valkyrie. Lucía introduces the first course as a Maltese delicacy, and Sergio approves. One of the servants enters with a tray and trips, and all of the guests laugh. Sergio remarks that he didn’t find it funny in the least.



Dancing and Shattered Glass While most of the guests retire to the parlor and start dancing, Leticia stays at the dining table alone. She throws an ash tray at a window, shattering it. The other guests remark that a “Jew must have passed by,” but Edmundo reports that it was the Valkyrie. As the host, Edmundo circulates and introduces the guests to each other. We learn that Cristián suffers from ulcers and that Leonora is dying of cancer.



Blanca’s Performance The guests congregate to hear Blanca play the Paradisi sonata on the piano. As they watch, some guests yawn and check their watches, while Cristián and Alberto exchange glances and make the “cut” signal with their hands. Ana opens her purse to take out a lace handkerchief, but inside the purse are chicken legs and feathers. When Blanca finishes, all the guests approach her to compliment her performance. Edmundo asks her to play again, but Blanca says that she is too tired. Leandro approaches the Alberto, the conductor, to ask his professional opinion, but he only corrects the New Yorker’s terminology.



Passionate Kiss and Dubious Greeting When the doctor checks on Leonora, she thanks him for his treatment and kisses him passionately. Edmundo sees the exchange and asks the doctor if she is cured, and he replies that Leonora will be bald in three months. Leandro, who has been living in New York, is the guest who knows the fewest guests. He encounters Cristián three times, but each with a different tone—first as if they are strangers, then friends, then enemies.



Tryst in the Bedroom Lucía and the colonel sneak off to the bedroom. The colonel is annoyed that the other guests have not yet left, and Lucía replies that it is only a matter of time. The colonel asks about Edmundo, and she suggests that she can meet him later in another room. They kiss passionately, and Lucía returns to the party.

Alberto’s wife Alicia After Blanca’s performance, Edmundo chats with Alicia, Alberto’s young wife. She remarks that Alberto is quite frisky in bed and that she even has to fight him off. Edmundo remarks that it is not the same for him, and an awkward exchange follows.

Guests Stay in the house Edmundo notices that Lucía’s lipstick is smeared and he suggests that the guests are uncomfortable and fading fast. He invites everyone to stay the night. Leandro takes off his jacket, and Lucía and Cristián comment on his poor manners. Julio turns off the lights in the adjoining room, and everyone finds a spot to rest. Eduardo and Beatriz start caressing each other. There are close-ups of Eduardo’s hands as he strokes Beatriz’s curves. She asks why they didn’t leave, and he replies that everyone decided to stay. They lie together on the rug in front of the piano. The guests start to collect their things and show weariness. Rita, a wife pregnant with her fourth child, lies on the couch. Lucía notices that Blanca has not yet left, and the pianist replies that she was on her way out but was distracted by Raul’s interesting story about Roman animal species. Blanca says she will leave immediately but cannot find her shawl.

The Next Morning Everyone wakes up confused and disheveled. Rita, Ana, and Silvia talk about their sleep, and Ana tells the story of a train derailment in Nice where all of the third-class passengers were crushed. She remarks that it is curious that she wasn't more horrified then, and then Rita suggests that the poor, like the wounded bull in the ring, are less sensitive to pain. The siblings Juana and Francisco comfort each other, and she compliments her brother by saying that he looks good disheveled. The couple on the rug have a similar conversation with Eduardo saying that Beatriz looks good disheveled, and Francisco "compliments" him on his "good hearing."

Sergio's Poor State Leticia and some of the other women have noticed that Sergio has become more ill over the course of the night. As he lays on the couch, Dr. Conde approaches and assesses his condition. Leonora asks the doctor if he will be all right, and he replies that Sergio will go bald soon. Leonora answers that she does not understand, and the doctor corrects himself by saying that Sergio will die within three hours.

Theories About the "Spell" A group of wives asks Lucía if they can freshen up, and she tries to lead them to her bedroom, but they cannot leave the parlor. A group of men watch them stall at the threshold, and Aranda begins to worry aloud about why no one left the night before. Moreover, the colonel notes that their behavior was not only strange but poor etiquette. Silvia remarks that she didn't want to be rude, and Leandro exhorts everyone to relax and chalk it up to enjoying each other's company. Blanca worries about her kids, but Rita says that she won't worry as long as the trustworthy tutor is looking after her brood.

Attempted Breakfast Julio, who has slept in the dining room, brings in cold cuts and coffee to the parlor, but when Lucía asks him to fetch spoons, he too, is unable to leave the parlor area. Blanca, Alberto and Alicia try to leave; the couple decide to stay and have coffee, and Blanca sits down, anguished on the threshold of the room. Lucía tries to comfort her. Dr. Conde continues to posit theories about their state.



Later that Night Dr. Conde notices that Sergio is dying and needs outside treatment. He begs Cristián and the others to break the spell. The women start to pee in vases in the closet that has a painting of a saint on the outside. Beatriz asks Julio for more coffee, but the mayordomo replies that nothing is left. Eduardo hands Beatriz a vase with old water that smells bad, and Beatriz vows to wait for a better option. Blanca, Raúl, and Alberto ask why their families on the outside have not yet come to rescue them.

Angry Confrontations Edmundo tries to calm down everyone when they ask why the servants left. Edmundo says that they must have had a good reason, but Julio explains that everyone was fine right up until the dinner. Raúl compares the servants to rats leaving a sinking ship. Dr. Conde reminds everyone not to panic and suggests that determination will help them get out of their "abulia." Raúl blames Edmundo for inviting them to an unexpected dinner, and the host replies that everyone enjoyed the soiree. Leticia defends Edmundo, Raúl insults her, and Leticia slaps him twice. Francisco becomes agitated and calls the women sluts. Juana apologizes on his behalf and tries to calm him down.

Magical Closets Silvia, Rita and Ana comment that upon entering the closet to pee in the vases, they have had visions: a cliff with a waterfall, an eagle flying, and a breeze with dry leaves. Beatriz tells Eduardo that she has a plan for their escape, and she will tell him after everyone goes to sleep. As most of the guests fall asleep on the floor, Eduardo gingerly walks to a closet with a painting of the Virgin and Child and lies down on a bed with Beatriz. Meanwhile, the doctor and Aranda notice that Sergio has died, and the doctor wants to hide his body so as to keep up morale. They open up the same closet door and place Sergio's dead body on the floor inside. As they lay him down, they hear and see the fiancées making love, but their sweet nothings are about rigor mortis and death. Leticia and Ana are sleeping with each other on the couch, and Ana awakens to see the disconnected hand of Sergio opening the closet door and creeping out onto the carpet.



Breaking the Pipe Several of the men use a hatchet to break through the bricks in the wall and open up a pipe. When the water spills out, everyone rushes with cups to drink it, and Cristián insists that the women go first. Dr. Conde warns everyone that if they drink too fast, they may get ill. Leticia brings water to Ana, who is lying on the couch and complaining of hunger. Rita remarks that perhaps it would have been better not to find water, as they are only prolonging their suffering. Beatriz approaches Julio, who is sitting and eating rolled up pieces of paper on a tray. He explains that eating the paper “fools the stomach.” He offers her some, but Beatriz says she is too disgusted to try it.



Bizarre Hygiene Francisco starts shaving with an electric razor, but Aranda unplugs it. Ana goes to comb her hair, but she only combs one section of the right side. Francisco complains to his sister that he can't bear the odd behavior, so Juana interrupts Ana to comb her hair properly. Rita asks Beatriz if she has seen Cristián's white pills in a silver box, and Beatriz replies that she will look for it. Cristián worries that someone is hiding the pillbox from him, and both he and Rita fret about the children. Rita consoles Cristián by saying that the deacon is probably taking good care of them.

Turning on Edmundo Leandro overhears Rita and Cristián's conversation, and Cristián confronts him. Both men proclaim that they have hated each other from the moment they met. Edmundo tries to break up the fight and reminds everyone to be courteous. Cristián lashes out at Edmundo, and Raúl blames the host for trapping them in the house. Edmundo leaves the conversation and takes refuge with Lucía and the colonel. Aranda comforts Edmundo but also kisses Lucía's hand as she begs him to break the spell. Lucía and the colonel plan a rosary.



Foraging and Chaos Lucía complains of the horrible smell. Eduardo and others try to plug up the cracks around the closet where Sergio's body is rotting. Julio collects the clay and bricks from the punctured wall and throws them into the adjoining room. Leticia squeezes her blackheads in the mirror. Raúl finds Cristián's missing pill box just across the parlor threshold and takes the box.

Leonora's Poor State The women ask Dr. Conde to check on Leonor, who is lying on the couch in severe pain. The doctor consols her but warns the other men that she desperately needs painkillers. Edmundo brings out a box of drugs that he bought abroad, and the doctor agrees that what was once recreational can now serve a good purpose. Francisco overhears that the pills contain morphine, and he plots with Juana to steal them after everyone falls asleep. He also continues to insult everyone by complaining about their bad body odor.



Leonora's Hallucination Leonora wakes up from a feverish dream and sees Sergio's detached hand crawling across the floor. She watches as the hand crawls under a silk cloth on the coffee table and then onto the floor. Leonora takes a heavy paperweight and manages to hit / press it onto the hand. When she returns to the couch, she notices that the hand is now creeping up her chest and about to strangle her. She throws it onto the coffee table, grabs a knife, and tries to stab it. The hallucination is broken with Alicia screaming and the guests trying to contain Leonora on the couch. Dr. Conde explains that she has a horrible fever, and the others vow to keep an eye on her.

Time Collapsing Eduardo and Beatriz try to estimate how much time has passed—they think a month—and they worry that they will never escape. Eduardo suggests that they lose themselves in the shadows. Meanwhile, Francisco has stolen Edmundo's drug pillbox and Raúl took notice.

More Fights and Anarchy Due to everyone's skulking around at night, Ana and the others start and wake up. The men accuse the colonel of stealing, and everyone is about to come to blows. Dr. Conde tries to break up the fight. Raúl starts to accuse Edmundo as the host of the nightmare. Aranda pushes Alicia when she starts screaming about food. The colonel apologizes, and Edmundo suggests that perhaps they should divide the room in half with the women on one side. The discussion is interrupted



when all hear three sheep bleating and coming up the staircase. The bear follows to the balcony, and the sheep actually cross the threshold.

Outside The commander and a band of police wait outside of the estate. When an engineer speaks with the commander, the policeman relates that no one was able to get into the house. The engineer insists that they try to make contact with those trapped inside on orders of the mayor. He further explains that his men didn't even attempt to enter despite being summoned. A crowd of onlookers approaches but does not pass the gate to the estate.

Waiting Outside Another priest brings the guests' well-dressed children to the outside the house so that they can see where their parents are. He gives them helium balloons. A group of old men discuss how to resolve the problem, and one onlooker proclaims that he can get in. When one of the boys enters the gate of the house holding his balloon, the adults think that perhaps he can make it inside. They all shout at him to continue, but he can only get a few steps past the gate before returning.



Slaughtering the Sheep The men break down a guitar and other objects to create a fire, while Alicia, Leticia, and Cristián groom themselves. Ana performs a Kabbalistic ritual with Blanca and Silvia—she takes the chicken feet and feathers from her purse and asks the women to hold them while she recites an incantation. Meanwhile, Leticia gives Edmundo a knife and rips off his head bandage so that he can blindfold the sheep next to him. The sheep strokes Edmundo's face with his head, and the camera cuts back to Ana. She throws up the chicken feathers and says that she needs pure blood of all of the sheep for the ritual to be effective.



Last Resorts and Losing Their Wits After the sheep slaughter, Francisco and Beatriz notice that blood is spilling out from under the closet door. When everyone comes to investigate, they see Beatriz and Eduardo sleeping together. The others hear the bear rummaging around the dining room, and they watch as he climbs up a column. Alberto and Cristián decide to shout the Masonic call for help. Francisco tries to push Leandro over the threshold. Leandro punches him, and Juana jumps into the fray. A few minutes later, everyone falls asleep and has feverish dreams, including surrealist images such as a cello with its strings being cut, and a wintery mountain scene with the pope on the summit.

Plot to Kill Edmundo The women become convinced that the spell will be broken if they collectively murder Edmundo. With the exception of Dr. Conde, all the men conspire to kill Edmundo as well. Dr. Conde warns them not to give into savagery, but they all lunge at him violently. Edmundo appears in front of the piano with Leticia and agrees to sacrifice himself. As he crosses the room, Leticia shouts out that everyone should stop.



Leticia's Solution When Leticia notices that the living guests are in the same spot as they were for Blanca's performance, she exhorts them to repeat the 3:00 AM rituals and conversations that occurred during and after the Paradisi Sonata. Blanca starts to play the end of the sonata, and everyone gets into their original viewing positions. Then, each person repeats, in order, their compliments for Blanca. Afterwards, Leticia walks towards the threshold and is finally able to cross it. Everyone follows her through the dining room. As they finally exit the house, the servants are able to approach the front door.



In the Church In the last scene, there is an establishing shot of domes and the church from the outside. The survivors of the house attend mass. The priest finishes the mass and proceeds to the side door with the bishops. When he reaches the threshold near the front door, he pauses and suggests that the congregants leave first. The congregants attempt to leave but stay bunched up at the exit. The camera cuts to an outside shot of the church

again with the bells ringing. There are gunshots and townspeople running around the plaza, and a group of guards stand in front of the church gates. We see a whole herd of sheep running into the church.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

EDMUNDO

As a gracious host from beginning to end, Edmundo consistently attempts to make his guests comfortable: first, by letting them stay the first night, then, by attempting to keep them calm in the face of the crisis, and then by his willingness to sacrifice himself so that his guests might be able to leave.

Polite Edmundo concerns himself with his guests' feelings and comfort. On the first night, he takes off his jacket so that Leandro and others do not feel self-conscious about falling asleep in the parlor. When the guests start panicking and in-fighting, Edmundo maintains his composure and models dignified behavior.

Sacrificial Edmundo kills the sheep and is willing to sacrifice himself to the mob at the end of the film. He mentions more than once that he would do anything to release his friends from the spell. Even before the crisis, the implication is that Edmundo is aware of Lucía's affair with Colonel Aranda, but he doesn't seek to confront or punish either of them.

LUCÍA

Lucía is also a gracious hostess, but her actions suggest that she is less loyal and sincere than her husband. Buñuel paints her as somewhat hypocritical given her affair with the colonel and her pretensions at dinner.

Gracious For the first half of the film, Lucía tries to help and console her guests. She makes an effort to make the banquet special, and she tries to serve breakfast the following morning. She also attempts to let the female guests freshen up. When sickness, fatigue and depression set in, she comforts her friends—especially Blanca, who is worried about her children, and Rita, who is pregnant.

Pretentious Lucía is determined to put on a show at dinner with a lot of elaborate and expensive courses. When the servants start to leave, she fires them immediately rather than listen to their concerns.

Deceptive Lucía is cheating on Edmundo with his best friend, and she has trysts right under her husband's nose. Her brazen and disloyal behavior suggests that she puts on a good face to hide her true nature, which comes out as the situation worsens.

LETICIA

Like most of the guests, Leticia's character is not fully fleshed out. Nonetheless, her fierce personality prompts her to action, and it is these moments that allow the other characters to fight back against their collective abulia / existential inertia.

Aggressive Very early in the film, the viewer learns that Leticia's nickname is the Valkyrie, and this framing suggests a warrior-like spirit and an ability to exist somewhere between life and death. This characterization is born out when Leticia defends Edmundo and also intervenes in fights. In addition, it is Leticia's instinct and assertiveness that finally breaks the spell.

Intelligent Leticia shows a calmness that suggests she is both practical and intelligent. Rather than give into panic, anger, and the herd mentality, Leticia reasons in a way that is similar to Dr. Conde and Edmundo.

DR. CONDE

As the respected physician in the group, Dr. Conde administers to all of the ill guests and strives to improve the chances at survival. Among the many characters, Dr. Conde is one of the few who maintains his composure throughout the crisis.

Calm Dr. Conde remains calm and collected even when he suspects that his patients are dying. He soothes Leonor and Rita, and he attempts to save Sergio and Cristián with the little treatment he can offer. When the group brainstorms about their inability to leave, the doctor suggests that they think of a method for breaking their state of abulia (see description in the **PHILOSOPHY** category below). Dr. Conde never engages in insults or fighting.

Compassionate The doctor often concerns himself with dulling the pain and lessening the suffering of the sick guests. He consoles and treats Leonora, and he even kisses her back when she embraces him. Later, he tries to ease the panic and anger of the others. When some of the men manage to break the pipe and access water, Dr. Conde waits until everyone else has had a chance to drink before he slowly sips his own water.

FRANCISCO

As the impetuous and spoiled young man of the group, Francisco is arguably the most self-serving guest during the crisis. He riles up the women and often incites fights among Cristián, Raúl, and Leandro: the biggest hotheads in the group. His behavior and comments act as a foil to the calm and compassionate demeanors of Edmundo and Dr. Conde.

Spoiled While all of the guests could be described as spoiled by their lives of luxury, Francisco lacks the refinement and consideration of the professionals in the group. His sister Juana compliments him and defends his bad behavior, and he thinks he is entitled to all of the provisions before the others.

Nasty Francisco often insults the other guests and refuses to maintain decorum. He complains about everyone's body odor and ticks, and he picks fights with everyone around him. He plots to steal Edmundo's drugs for himself (even though he is not ill), and he threatens Leandro at the end of the film.

THEMES

SOCIETY

Gender: *Virgins* From the very beginning of the film, the guests' gossip suggests that the only virgin in the group is Leticia. In addition, Leticia's impulsive and aggressive personality earns her the nickname of the Valkyrie. The implication is that Leticia's purity and aggressiveness provides her with the ability to break the spell.

Religion

Science versus Rituals Some guests, particularly Dr. Conde and Colonel Aranda, try to remain calm and find practical solutions for the problems at hand: administering pills, rationing food and water, establishing a routine, and trying to break down a psychological barrier. Others resort to religious measures to survive: sacrifices, incantations, and praying.

Saints On each of the closet or bureau doors in the parlor, there is a painting of a saintly figure: an angel on the door where Sergio's body is stored, Virgin and Child on another door, and a saint on the makeshift bathroom closet.

Class

Bourgeoisie The Nóbiles and their friends are upper middle class or rich. All are well-dressed and conscious of their appearance. The Nóbiles are rich enough to have a big home with multiple rooms and

floors, and they have enough money to hire several servants. Many of the guests are professionals and very cultured and educated. For example, Blanca plays the piano at a professional level. Like in many of his films, Buñuel is critiquing the decadence and hypocrisy of the upper classes.

Working Class Although the servants at the house are portrayed as somewhat stupid and clumsy, it is they who are able to leave the party at will. The implication is that the workers do not suffer from as much existential angst as their bosses.

POLITICS

Power

Political Allegory Some critics interpret the guests' imprisonment as either an allegory for the oppression under Franco in Spain (1939-1975) or the decadence of the upper classes right before the Mexican Revolution broke out in 1910. In both cases, the rich find themselves trapped in a dangerous political position.

Anarchy Despite Edmundo and other characters' efforts to maintain order, courtesy, reason, and composure, it is not long before the guests' start to fight amongst themselves. Although the characters are willing to tend to the sick and dying to a point, they also fight to get food, water, and medicine for themselves. If it were not for Leticia's solution, the mob would have most likely killed Edmundo and perhaps others.

RELATIONSHIPS

Sexuality

Desire Before the guests realize that they are trapped, the various couples engage in erotic foreplay after dinner. There is the obvious tryst between Lucía and Colonel Aranda in her marital bedroom, and Eduardo caresses Beatriz seductively the first night in the house.

Adultery Lucía and the Colonel are having an affair, and they even attempt to have sex after Blanca's concert (with Edmundo still close by). The lovers' brazenness suggests a hypocritical attitude in which the rich appear virtuous but do what they want in secret.

Marriage Many of the characters are promised or in established marriages, yet their relationships seem tepid at best. There are old men with trophy wives and supposed marriages of convenience

PYSCHOLOGY

Fear As the situation worsens, the guests' fear rises to the point that they are willing to murder Edmundo in order to escape the parlor. With the possible exceptions of Beatriz and Eduardo, all of the guests fear death and weakness.

Subconscious Many guests have nightmares while they sleep and visions at the moment of falling asleep or waking up. These visions usually have to do with the fears and desires from their Id. The blood and severed hand indicate an obsession with death, dismemberment, and putrefaction, and the visions of mountains and sky suggest an escapist dream.

LIFE STAGES

Old Age While some of the guests are young or middle-aged, the old men in the group represent the fears and anxieties related to death. Sergio, who resents the jokes of the younger guests, is the first to fall ill and die. Dr. Conde and Cristián decide to hide the body so the others don't panic. Alberto, the conductor, has a young wife and clings to an illusion of youth—in particular, by having sex with Alicia after every performance.

Death Death is both a psychological / philosophical construct and a corporeal reality for the guests. The title of the film alludes to several artworks, including a painting by Buñuel's friend and colleague, Salvador Dalí. The depictions of the angel often indicate death during war. In addition, Leticia's moniker—the Valkyrie—is associated with mythic figures who assist warriors passing into Valhalla.

Everyone knows that Leonora is dying of cancer, and that brings the specter of death to the party even before their inertia sets in. From a psychological perspective, many of the guests recognize their own deaths as the logical endpoint of the stagnation. This is why Beatriz and Eduardo decide to embrace death in the closet rather than run from it. Physically, there are the remnants of the human and animal corpses—the blood, the severed hand, Sergio’s dead body, the chicken legs and feathers, and presumably, the physical remnants of the sacrificed sheep.

Putrefaction Along with the visual reminders of death in the parlor, there is also the constant bad smell: Sergio’s rotting body, the stale and stagnant water, and the worsening body odor of everyone. There is also the fear of wasting away from hunger or dehydration.

PHILOSOPHY

Conception of Time The key moment when the guests are unable to leave happens right after Blanca’s performance at 3:00 AM. This time in the wee hours of the morning marks the transition from party to nightmare. During the spell, there are certain signs of time passing: day turning into night, increased hunger and thirst, body odor, and the rotting of Sergio’s corpse. On the other hand, time is also arbitrary and suspended: the guests lose track of how many days or weeks they have been trapped. If as much time had passed as the guests believed, many more of them would have perished from dehydration and hunger.

Absurdism As a vanguard of French and Spanish surrealism, it is little wonder that Buñuel incorporates other avant-garde movements into this film. Along with the absurdity of the state of inertia, Buñuel also plays with the absurdist tropes of repetition and circular movement. Throughout the film, the characters repeat dialogue and actions two or three times. While they engage in some concrete activities, they are mostly trapped in a vicious cycle with no end in sight. Ironically, it is the repetition of the 3:00 AM activities that finally allows the guests to escape the vicious circle (until they again find themselves trapped in the church).

Existentialism Many critics interpret the guests’ inability to leave as the manifestation of an existential crisis. Because the bourgeoisie are comfortable and superficial, their lives lack enough meaning for them to break out of the trance. Conversely, the practical necessities of the working class propel the servants forward and prevent them from being trapped in the parlor.

Abulia Abulia is a psychological and emotional state that is similar to ennui and depression. It was a term used to describe the collective let-down that Spaniards experienced in the early twentieth century after having lost their last “New World” colonies—Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Philippines. Writers of the turn of the twentieth century used the concept as a consistent theme in their melancholy masterpieces, so it is not surprising that Dr. Conde would make this literary allusion when discussing the guests’ predicament.

Phenomenology / Scatology The guests’ bodies and their position in space (the crowded parlor) become a key element of their spell. Whereas they initially concern themselves with their fine attire, music, travel, and the food at the banquet, they quickly have to deal with the logistical matters of survival. Some guests use hygiene or drugs to distract themselves from their emotional fragility. All of them have to defecate in the urns and deal with their bad body odor. In the end, the bodily functions and survival trump all efforts at discretion and composure.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How is Buñuel’s style in this particular film surrealistic? What is the effect of the hallucinatory /nightmarish images and sequences?
2. Consider bestial symbolism throughout the film. Why does the banquet include three sheep and a bear cub?
3. What is Buñuel’s philosophical message with this satire? Is it absurdist, existentialist, or both?
4. What are the references to Mexican or Spanish history in this film? What is the significance of the gunshots in the last scene?
5. Along with the overt Biblical references, Buñuel also incorporates religious rituals and symbolism. What is the purpose of the sacrifices and prayers conducted in the parlor?