

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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***Illusion Travels By Streetcar / La ilusión viaja en tranvía* (1954)**

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*. During his long exile in Mexico, Buñuel wrote and directed a handful of commercial films, including the featured comedy of this essay, *Illusion Travels by Streetcar* (1954). The middle period of Buñuel's career was also characterized by three satirical dramas loosely based on nineteenth-century Spanish novels: *Nazarín* (1959), *Viridiana* (1961), and *Tristana* (1970). In the 1970s, Buñuel returned to his hyper-erotic and surreal style in such films as *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972) and *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977).

Film *Illusion Travels by Streetcar* (1954) is a black-and-white comedy set in Mexico City in the 1940s. The plot involves a joyride by two tram drivers and their neighborhood customers, all of whom are mourning the loss of their favorite streetcar. The cast features one of the most popular ingenues of the Golden Age of Mexican cinema, Lilia Prado, who starred in three Buñuel films. The iconic character actor Fernando Soto, known by his comical moniker "Mantequilla," or Butter, provides several moments of slapstick humor. During a conference held in 1994, *Illusion* was named one of the best Mexican films of all time.

Background Due to a long exile in Mexico, Buñuel's films in the 1940s and 1950s were often shot in and around Mexico City. *Illusion* was no exception: it was filmed in the famed Churubusco Studio and in the streets of Mexico City. Like the comedy *Mexican Bus Ride* (1952) from two years earlier, *Illusion* is largely a buddy film with comical misadventures. The screenplay of both films was written by Luis Alcoriza (among others), who would later co-author one of the director's most acclaimed films, *Exterminating Angel* (1962). The focus on the streets of Mexico City and working-class characters mirrors the style and themes of many of Buñuel's Mexican (and Spanish-language) films of the early 1950s. In this sense, *Illusion* offers a companion piece to *The Brute* (1952) or *The Young and the Damned* (1950), albeit with a much lighter and more palatable tone.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

<i>Lupita</i>	Tarrajás's sister and Caireles's love interest
<i>Juan Godínez "Caireles"</i>	Skinny tram driver
<i>Tobías Hernández "Tarrajás"</i>	Fat tram driver
<i>Papá Pitillos</i>	The retired driver with heart problems
<i>Pablo</i>	Chauffeur and Lupita's boyfriend
<i>The Professor</i>	Director of the Christmas pageant
<i>Don Manuel</i>	Transit boss

SYNOPSIS

Caireles and Tarrajas are two tram drivers in the bustling streets of Mexico City in the early 1950s. When their beloved Tram 133 breaks down days before Christmas, Caireles manages to temporarily fix the problem. However, the drivers' boss, Don Manuel, gives them the bad news: Tram 133 will be discontinued, replaced with a newer model, and the men will be laid off—at least temporarily.

Devastated, Caireles and Tarrajas get drunk and forget that they are supposed to act in the neighborhood Christmas pageant with Tarrajas's sister, Lupita. Caireles repeatedly pines after Lupita despite the fact that she is dating a "richer" chauffeur named Pablo. After stumbling through a farcical performance, the drivers go back to the station and decide to take out old 133 for one last joyride.

Initially, Caireles and Tarrajas plan to give their friends from the Christmas pageant-party a free ride home, then drive the tram to its designated pick-up location. As the night goes on, however, the drivers find themselves unable to break from their standard route and pick-ups: all of the city's workers and businessmen need transportation to and from work.

As the hours pass, Lupita gets wind of her brother's "stolen" tram adventure and tracks him down. She boards the tram to convince Caireles and Tarrajas to turn in 133, but a series of blockages and misadventures prevents them from doing so. Caireles takes advantage of the alone time with Lupita to court her, and she begins to soften to his advances.

Meanwhile, a sickly old man, Papá Pitillos, gets wind of the scheme and tattles on Caireles and Tarrajas. Despite Pitillos's persistent accusations, the drivers bring the tram back to the main depot and get away without punishment. The characters walk outside in the night air. Caireles and Lupita kiss, which indicates that the working-class man will finally get the girl.

SCENES

The Streets of Mexico City There are a few aerial shots of Mexico City, followed by a panoramic shot of city trams passing each other on the central tracks. As the camera follows one tram on its path, a male narrator describes the bustling rhythm of any big city but especially, Mexico City. The voiceover continues to describe how every person chases a dream, or illusion, and each individual's story contributes to the heartbeat of the city. The narrator ends by saying that the story of the film will focus on a particular neighborhood, which could be any one of many throughout Mexico City.



The Tram Breaks Down The camera cuts to a tram station where workers are yelling at each other on either side of the tracks. One man explains to a mechanic that a specific tram is having mechanical problems. Other trams pass between the men, and the mechanic crosses over to the other worker. A third man emerges from the side door of the broken tram with a wrench in hand. The mechanic chides the third man for doing the mechanics' job, explaining that it is inappropriate for a driver (the third man) to do repairs. Nonetheless, the mechanic listens to the third man's report—the magnets and the brake shoe were not working, but he (the third man) fixed them. All three walk alongside the tracks in order to report the mechanical issue on tram number 133.



Caireles and Tarrajas Lose Their Tram In the supervisor's office, the workers' boss is writing on a big chart. He explains that the broken tram 133 will take 8 days to repair, which means it will not be in circulation until Christmas Eve. The supervisor praises the tram drivers for their efficiency in trying to fix the tram, and he criticizes the mechanics for not doing their jobs well. The supervisor asks the other suits whether it is feasible to spend the time and money repairing the tram. One of the underlings gives a letter to the supervisor which indicates that the tram will be replaced with a newer model in short order. The supervisor gets irritated that no one informed him sooner. The two tram drivers look at each other, alarmed, and ask the boss what they should do. The supervisor replies that they will be paid for their time and perhaps re-hired when the new tram arrives.



Drinking Away Their Sorrows The two tram drivers, who call each other Caireles (Curls) and Tarrajas, leave the station dejected. The mechanic tells them to drop the tram off at the corner of Depositos and Guerrero. They walk out and watch wistfully as workers unload crates of beer just outside the station. Rather than close out their day of work, the two decide to go to the bar instead—given that it is already 5:00 and they are craving beer.



Dueling Suitors at the Party There is a crowd gathering in the streets, where a man is beating a piñata in the shape of a man. A driver named Pablo approaches a beautiful young woman and implies that he intends to marry her. The woman responds by brushing her hair and teasing him. Caireles and Tarrajas approach the couple while Caireles expresses his annoyance that Pablo, a chauffeur, is courting Lupita (the young woman). Caireles reports to Tarrajas that he made his intentions known to her, but she wasn't interested. Lupita approaches and chides the two for arriving late and drunk. Caireles starts to relate the sad story of their day, but Tarrajas interrupts him. Lupita reminds them that they are about to miss the Christmas pageant, and Tarrajas admits that he had forgotten all about it.



Preparing for the Christmas Pageant A bespectacled gentleman walks around to the actors in the pageant and tells them where to get dressed for the show. Lupita and Caireles start sniping at each other as Tarrajas listens. Caireles insults Pablo for his effrontery, but Lupita defends her suitor and praises his nice clothing and stable job. Tarrajas remarks that he is overly ambitious and a sort of poser. The bespectacled man spots the tram drivers and exhorts them to hurry up. He tells them they are setting a bad example, especially given that they are the lead actors in the pageant.

Pageant Scene 1: Satan Cast Out of Heaven The pageant begins with a prelude of trumpets and a dance. On the side, a woman serves a poor man free punch. The audience turns to the stage as several actors dressed as angels pose in a heavenly tableau. Tarrajas plays one of the angels (perhaps Gabriel), but due to his drunkenness, he stumbles around the stage and misses cues. When a paper dove puppet "flies" in, Tarrajas mimes shooting it until the other angel actors



contain him. Once Tarrajas leaves the stage, the actors continue depicting a show-down between God (played by a remarkably lucid Caireles) and Lucifer in heaven.

Pageant Scene 2: The Garden of Eden Tarrajas reappears as Adam chasing around a sexy Eve (Lupita) in an animal skin outfit. The audience laughs at Tarrajas's antics. The devil enters and mimes tempting Eve with the apple. She resists temporarily but chases the devil behind a rock formation. Tarrajas sees the two behind the rocks and dives on top of them. God enters (still interpreted by Caireles) and condemns the two to painful childbirth and sweat-inducing labor, then forces them to leave the stage. God then commands Michael to stab Satan for his treachery. Satan falls down dead, and the audience cheers.



Caireles Makes a Plan After the pageant, a still-drunk Tarrajas asks the woman at the dessert table for punch, but she refuses. Caireles takes Tarrajas aside and suggests that they return to the tram station and steal some of the beer that the workers were unloading earlier. The camera cuts to the depot, where Caireles has successfully stolen a crate of beer. The two friends happen to walk in from of tram 133 and start to bemoan their lost profession. They also complain about their respective nick-names—Caireles doesn't like that he is associated with his wavy hair, and Tarrajas is



offended that others call him fat and “rat” as a play on words of his name.

Party Squabbles and Drunk Pronouncements

Back at the cast/ Christmas party, the Professor looks for Caireles and Tarrajas and remarks that they are wilier than the devil. Pablo asks Lupita to go for a drive and stop at a lookout point. She pretends to say yes but runs away. The camera cuts to the inside of the tram, where Caireles and Tarrajas are consoling each other drunkenly. After a while, they decide to drive the tram to the party and take the guests on a joy ride. The poor man at the party chats with the Professor as they wait for the tram to show up. The Professor explains to him how the poor suffer lower salaries over time, especially when there is high inflation. Caireles and Tarrajas pull up, still drunk, but they do not yet see the partygoers.



Ride Across Town with Repeat Customers The drivers finally spot Lupita and other partygoers and offer to give them a ride. While the others get in, Caireles steps down to chat up Lupita. She remains cold and annoyed that he is too drunk and too familiar. Caireles offers to take her home as part of their new “pilot service.” Everyone gets on, and Caireles explains to everyone that they will take everyone where they want to go and with the “greatest courtesy.”



Tarrajas changes the sign to Rastro, the first destination. An old woman hands out drinks to the other passengers while Caireles dances with the continually annoyed Lupita. Tarrajas stops the tram, the old woman gets out, and she thanks the drivers for their pilot service.

First Pick-Up: Poor Workers and Two Nuns When the old woman gets off at Rastro, a large group of bedraggled workers in serapes and baggy clothes approach and get on. Lupita warns the drivers that the pilot service is going to get them in trouble as more and more people get on. When the mob packs in, Lupita explains that the night ride is free. Two old women squabble, and several passengers carry supplies and animals, including a dead chicken and a pet dog. Two nuns and two male workers scurry toward the tram and get on. As the tram starts moving, a woman offers Caireles a taste of her roasted rooster dish, and she is offended when he says no. A baker offers Lupita rolls, which she accepts graciously. An old man falls asleep as a hanging calf carcass brushes the top of his head.



The Two Women “Polish” Jesus When two women sit down with a foot-long sculpture of Jesus in hand, some of the women recognize the image as a representation of “El Señor de la Columna,” or Our Lord of the Column. The workers remove their hats and cross themselves, and the women whisper to each other that they regret stealing the statue from the church. The two women ritualistically caress the sculpture as they pray. Lupita asks for the backstory of the statue and the saint, and the women explain that they are going to take it to another holy sight as a tribute to Jesus. The caressing woman reports that upon praying to this particular iteration of Jesus, the other woman was saved from a rough labor. However, the recovered woman reports that she still lost her baby for lack of sustenance during her pregnancy. The other passengers touch the statue before getting off at the next stop. Lupita also gets off at that stop.



Caireles and Tarrajas Worry About Getting Caught When the tram is empty, Caireles and Tarrajas worry that someone will know that they did not turn in the tram to its proper place—the road Depositos. They decide to turn in the tram before their boss arrives in the morning. When they arrive at the designated drop off intersection (the roads Guerrero and Depositos), another working tram is in their spot. Yet another tram starts to come up from behind and almost runs into 133. Trapped, the two drivers decide to continue to as if they were following their regular route, but they changed the sign to “Special” so that no one boards.



Young Boys Create a Ruckus A teacher and huge class of young boys swarm the tram and get on before the drivers can stop them. The teacher gives the drivers the address to a school in Xochimilco and declares that the tram system is the safest way for kids to get around the city. Tarrajas reluctantly starts the tram as the boys start playing and fighting. The teacher breaks it up and prompts them to sing a song while they travel.



Scarcity and Riots The camera cuts to a bakery + convenience store on the tram route, where a long line of women wait for bread. The owner emerges and puts up a sign indicating that the price has gone up, and the mob turns angry. One woman accuses the owner of price gouging, but he replies that inflation has hurt him, too. Lupita walks away from the mob with tortilla in hand. One of the transit supervisors approaches her and tells her that Caireles and Tarrajas did not turn in Tram 133. Rather than report them, the man asks Lupita to put pressure on her brother and get them to return the tram immediately. Lupita agrees and asks him to give her time to resolve the problem. Lupita goes to the station and asks Pablo for a ride. She explains that she needs to track down her brother and Tram 133.



More Trouble with the Schoolboys The camera cuts back to the interior of the tram, where three of the older schoolboys are sipping tequila in secret. They start insulting each other and pushing, so the teacher has to break up yet another fight. Caireles yawns and tries to stay awake while the teacher describes how difficult it is to manage young boys. The teacher goes on to say that one of the boys in particular is a son of a prostitute. Some boys crowd the front part of the tram and annoy Tarrajas—they ask to drive the tram and stop for chocolate. Tarrajas pushes them back and Caireles asks his partner how much longer to Xochimilco. Tarrajas replies that they are almost there.



Film Crew in the Streets and Bullying on the Tram

When the tram approaches Xochimilco, a film crew is blocking the road. The older boys see a sexy actress putting on pantyhose alongside the street. They cry out that the woman is the orphaned boy's mother. The bullied boy goes to the window but can't really defend himself against his classmates. Defeated, the teacher tells the boys to get off, and they all run over to the film set. The orphaned boy watches the actress brush her hair until she tells him to follow his classmates.



Pablo and Lupita Track Down the Tram After leaving the rowdy boys, the drivers continue driving in the central part of the city. Pablo's car pulls up next to the tram and get them to stop. Lupita gets out of the car and onto the tram, then reads Caireles the riot act. Other drivers honk at both the tram and the car, so Pablo runs out to move out of the way. Lupita tries to follow him, but Caireles refuses to let her deboard. She runs to a back window and shouts at Pablo while both vehicles are moving. Pablo gives up, but Tarrajas ends up stopping the car anyway when an inspector shows up on the tracks.



Distracting the Inspector The inspector reports that the tram should be on another route. Tarrajas resumes his normal route while Lupita distracts the inspector. The inspector gets off at the next stop, and Tarrajas has to change the sign from Special to Niño Perdido. Lupita vows to get off, too, but Tarrajas stops her.

Businessmen and Papá Pitillos Board A group of well-to-do passengers get on and insist on paying the fare. Among them is Don Arcadio, Don Enrique, and a rich gringa who speaks broken Spanish. The two businessmen, Arcadio and Enrique, discuss their investments. A friend of Tarrajas, an old man named Papá Pitillos, sits down on the tram step. He is obviously not well, but he gets on the tram and greets Tarrajas. Pitillos notices that Tarrajas is wearing a mechanic's uniform and nametag instead of his normal driver's outfit. When Lupita approaches, Tarrajas confesses that Pitillos is in bad shape and they had better keep an eye on him. Pitillos continues to nag Caireles about violating tram rules, and the old man notices that the teacher's paper from earlier has a different tram number on the order.



Pitillos Reports the Violation Pitillos gets off and calls the station to report the situation. The supervisors confirm that the tram is out of service and that the drivers are suspended for the time being. Tarrajas notices that Pitillos is reporting them, so they leave quickly. Tarrajas stops down the road and asks the rich passengers to disembark. They resist initially, but get off. The two continue to drive to a neighborhood where cattle roam the streets. Lupita finds them and gets on once again. Meanwhile, Pitillos has walked slowly to an internal part of the city and continues to tell officials about the drivers' malfeasance.



Caireles Longs to Kiss Lupita While the trio is stopped in the rural neighborhood, Tarrajas plays horseshoes with rocks. Lupita is asleep in the tram, and Caireles watches her longingly. He sits behind her and mimes caressing her, but refrains from actually touching her. He then sees her thigh and a garter. He touches her thigh but only to pull down her skirt. Lupita wakes up with a start and accuses Caireles of "taking advantage." She calms down and says that she is nervous about the stolen tram. Caireles caresses her cheek but accidentally smears grease on her face, which he then wipes off affectionately.



Corn or Fertilizer? There is a truck laden with heavy sacks. Tarrajas approaches a man surveying the unloading of the truck and asks the supposed foreman for a light. The foreman acts skittish and asks what Tarrajas is doing. Tarrajas replies that they are on a break "waiting." He goes to the sacks and reads Fertilizer. However, another bag falls to the ground and splits open, revealing kernels of corn. The foreman and his men grab Tarrajas and prevent him from going back to the tram. Meanwhile, a brawl breaks out with workers fighting over the bags of grain. Tarrajas manages to break free and get back on the tram.



Pitillo Has a Heart Attack Lupita and the drivers head back to the center of town and encounter Papá Pitillos, who stands on the tram line. Pitillos gets in and accuses them of stealing the tram. Caireles fights him and tries to throw him off. Pitillos moves towards the front as if to drive the tram himself, but he starts to collapse with heart problems. Lupita helps him to a seat. When Pitillos recovers his breath, he starts to argue with Caireles and Tarrajas, saying that he is the most experienced tram driver. In the heat of the argument, Pitillos collapses unconscious. Another passerby waves a cop over, and the policemen helps carry Pitillo out of the tram and onto a step in front of a pharmacy. The pharmacist agrees to fetch him medication, and the policeman sits at the counter. Pitillo comes to, disoriented, and walks back to the tram. Lupita welcomes him back, saying that he will outlive them all. Rather than get in the tram again, Pitillo hails a taxi.



Pitillo Keeps Accusing the Drivers The camera cuts to an interior shot of the plush office of the owner of the tram company. Pitillo waits in the lobby to catch Don Manuel. The old busybody explains the situation, but Don Manuel assures him that Tram 133 is where it is supposed to be. The boss offers to escort him to the station, where both men see Caireles and Tarrajas getting off the old tram. Pitillos retorts that the two thieves just now returned the tram. The other supervisor argues that a stolen tram would hardly be traversing the city in broad daylight. Don Manuel asks Pitillos to drop it and he will give him a “surprise” for being such a vigilant citizen. Pitillos continues to argue and says that he doesn’t want a handout. Don Manuel reminds him that is retired with a pension and can no longer control the business. The boss asks the others to throw out Pitillos.



Final Narration The final sequence begins with a panoramic, long-distance shot of the station exit. All four workers and Lupita exit into the darkness. Pitillos keeps fretting, but the drivers link arms with him and walk down the street. Lupita follows behind. Caireles turns back to kiss Lupita. We see the quintet walk up the street as the male narrator’s voiceover describes the rhythm of the city. He admits that while this story may not seem important in the grand scheme of things, it does trace the lives of these characters. The narrator declares that there are thousands of small stories that make up the heart of the city.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

CAIRELES Caireles is a typical, working-class Mexican who tries to do his job well and survive in the big city. He is tall, thin, and has a tendency towards depression, yet he perseveres both in his efforts to fix the tram and his desire to win over Lupita. His resourcefulness allows not only for the joyride, but his eventual victory in love.

Resourceful Although Caireles is somewhat of a belligerent drunk, he is also the problem-solver throughout the film. Right from the beginning, Caireles diagnoses the mechanical problems of the tram and manages to execute a temporary fix. He is the one who suggests picking up the party guests and seeing everyone home safely, and he is also the one who tries to return the tram in a timely fashion.

Yearning Much of Caireles's annoyance derives from his wish to have a successful, stable job and to succeed in life. Even more importantly, Caireles pines for Lupita and wishes that he could win her from Pablo. When Lupita falls asleep on the tram, he refrains from molesting her and gazes at her fondly, which indicates that he sincerely wishes to marry her.

TARRAJAS Like Caireles and most of the characters in the film, Tarrajas is a working-class technician who is trying to survive in Mexico City. Physically, he is the Abbott to Caireles's Costello in that he is shorter, fatter, and more rambunctious than his friend. His playfulness keeps everyone's spirits up, and his industriousness aids in transporting the passengers one last time.

Playful When the drivers are temporarily laid off and cast aside, Tarrajas immediately suggests getting drunk and partying. He sees the joyride as a farewell party for the tram. In addition, Tarrajas is a skilled character actor with good comic timing, as evidenced by his multiple roles in the Christmas pageant—angel, devil, and Adam.

Industrious Like Caireles, Tarrajas does his job well and takes pride in his work. Even when the pair embark on their drunken joyride, Tarrajas drives the tram all through the day and night. He knows the routes throughout the city well, and he changes the signs in order to deal with the various stops and tangents that the characters experience. He manages to handle the partially-broken tram skillfully with no sleep.

PITILLOS Pitillos is an old man with heart problems who walks with a cane. As a retired tram driver, Pitillos longs for the respect and control that he used to have at work. He uses complaints and visits to the supervisors' office as a way of "staying in the game." His obsession with the rules underscores his conservative nature.

Tenacious Despite his frequent spells and his collapse at the end of the film, Pitillos persists in tracking Tram 133, chiding Caireles and Tarrajas, and reporting back to the head office. He consistently calls and visits Don Manuel in order to get the tram to its proper location. Even when he is thrown out of the station, Pitillos keeps on grilling the younger drivers.

Conservative Pitillos has a clear sense of right and wrong and believes that the tram drivers should follow the rules to the letter. He constantly criticizes Caireles and Tarrajas, not only for their joyride but for not following tram protocol.

THEMES

SOCIETY

Class Nearly all of the characters are working-class Mexicans who are trying to provide for their families. Caireles and Tarrajas epitomize the working man who experiences the challenges of dealing with everyday problems, capitulating to bosses, and constantly fearing being laid off or having to deal with inflation. In a key scene outside of the tram, the professor character explains how every economic recession or problem immediately affects the working man first. There are also frequent references to unionization. Buñuel and Alcoriza underscore the plight of the urban Mexicans throughout the film, especially with regards to scarcity of food and the instability of work. The tram system constitutes the lifeline for all sorts of city-dwellers--it the artery of the city. Nearly every working-class profession or group is represented on the tram, from indigenous farmers to teachers to butchers. Over the course of the night and day, Caireles and Tarrajas transport every sort of Mexican imaginable, and all of them depend upon transportation to get to work. Ironically, the rich businessmen on the outskirts of the city also ride the tram, which again suggests its vital importance for every echelon of the city.

Illustrative Moment: Lupita Gets the Last Tortilla

There is a bakery + convenience store on the tram route, where a long line of women wait for bread. The owner emerges and puts up a sign indicating that the price has gone up, and the mob turns angry. Lupita walks away from the mob with tortilla in hand. This short scene interrupts the "tram" action of the film and does



not move the story forward. Its purpose is to emphasize the economic inequality and challenges that working-class Mexicans faced in the 1950s. Even during the Christmas season, the workers cannot enjoy food security. This sort of indictment of post-revolutionary Mexican modernism is common in many of Buñuel's Mexican films of the 1940s and 1950s. The Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) was intended to redistribute wealth and land to the poor and indigenous farmers, but the ideals did not materialize.

Religion Although the bustling of the city is constant, as the narrator tells us, there is also the specific context of the Christmas season. Tram 133 breaks down a week before Christmas, which is why the characters have a pageant performance and party that very night. In addition, Mexican culture celebrates the season for several weeks, including the climax on Christmas Eve with the Misa de Gallo (the Rooster's Mass) at midnight and the celebration of the Epiphany a few days later. Buñuel and Alcoriza infuse the film with holiday traditions and references, from the effigy-like piñata to the indigenous woman's roasted rooster dish. Ironically, the pageant play is not a Nativity, or Passion, or anything related to Jesus. Instead, the drivers and Lupita portray some of the chapters of Genesis, and particularly those that star Satan. It is possible that Buñuel and Alcoriza intentionally created a subversive framing of original sin through Tarrajas's farcical antics on stage. Later, during the "pilot service," the two holy women discuss Jesus's miracle and describe their pilgrimage to a chapel.

Illustrative Moment: The Two Women "Steal" Our Lord of the Column When two women sit down with a foot-long sculpture of Jesus in hand, some of the women recognize the image as a representation of "El Señor de la Columna," or Our Lord of the Column. The workers remove their hats and cross themselves, and the women whisper to each other that they regret stealing the statue from the church. The two women ritualistically caress the sculpture as they pray. Lupita asks for the backstory of the statue and the saint, and the women explain that they are going to take it to another holy site as a tribute to Jesus. The caressing woman explains that upon praying to this particular iteration of Jesus, the other woman was saved from a rough labor. However, the recovered woman reports that she still lost her baby for lack of sustenance during her pregnancy. The other passengers touch the statue before getting off at the next stop. This sequence, while potentially referencing the other two Marys at Christ's Resurrection, also reflects the devotional and religious rituals of working-class Mexicans. In particular, it is a common practice to pray to a particular saint (or iteration of Jesus) in order to cure one's ills. If the saint grants a miracle, the recipient shows gratitude and devotion by offering a tribute and placing it at the saint's shrine or holy place.



RELATIONSHIPS

Friendship Obviously, Caireles and Tarrajas have a special relationship. They have worked together for years and spend much of their free time together. In some ways, the two drivers offer a template for other pairs in Buñuel's later films such as the pilgrims Jean and Pierre in *The Milky Way* (1969). In both films, the duos have an Abbott and Costello or Laurel and Hardy dynamic. Caireles is in love with Tarrajas's sister, and all three are comfortable enough to rehearse and perform the Christmas pageant together. The two drivers also work together to problem-solve with few squabbles. Their joyride reflects a larger solidarity among all of the tram workers, and by extension, city workers. Caireles and Tarrajas show respect and concern for Pitillos despite his relentless attempts to rat them out. In addition, Buñuel and Alcoriza create a sense of camaraderie among the commuters on the tram—they share stories and goodies, the young help the old or ill, and the drivers use their last night on the tram to offer everyone the free "pilot service."

Illustrative Moment: Caireles and Tarrajas Make a Plan Together Caireles and Tarrajas console each other drunkenly inside the tram. After a while, they decide to drive the tram to the party and take the guests on a joy ride. This decision, while necessary to keep the plot moving forward, demonstrates perfectly the drivers' love



for each other. They have already spent hours drowning their sorrows in the bar and performing together in the pageant play, yet they decide that the most meaningful tribute to each other is performing their job pro-bono. It is an opportunity to celebrate their work together—one last time.

QUEST

Dreams The concept of “illusion” in the film’s title suggests that the dreams of the drivers, and by extension, the workers of Mexico City, are not rooted in reality. Yet, the characters live in the urban realities of the city and the challenges of daily life in the capital city. If anything, the workers suffer too much reality; therefore, the dream is a helpful antidote to their problems. For this reason, the narrator in the opening sequence equates illusion with personal narratives and the characters’ goals. Caireles and Tarrajas call their last night on the tram a joyride or spin around town, but they are also longing for something as they drive around the city. They long to make their last night as drivers impactful for themselves and their working-class community. Both drivers have the reputation of being faithful and dependable workers; therefore, this joyride represents a chaotic last hurrah for the main characters. The “illusion” is that the tram and the workers can serve their purpose (and the city) forever. However, the characters realize that the tram service, just like everything else in the city, can be taken away from them.

Illustrative Moment: Opening Narration: The Nature of the Urban Dream There are a few aerial shots of Mexico City, followed by a panoramic shot of city trams passing each other on the central tracks. As the camera follows one tram on its path, a male narrator describes the bustling rhythm of any big city but especially, Mexico City.

The voiceover continues to describe how every person chases a dream, or illusion, and each individual’s story contributes to the heartbeat of the city. The narrator ends by saying that the story of the film will focus on a particular neighborhood, which could be any one of many throughout Mexico City. This opening narration not only characterizes the urban dream, but also provides a foundation for the other themes throughout the film, including the search for meaning in relationships, work, and faith. The narrator indicates that the illusions of the city are both individual and universal, as if each character’s story becomes a cog in the wheel of urban movement.



CHANGE

Modernity vs Tradition A big part of Mexico’s political and social transience at midcentury is the effort to modernize: to renovate, to create efficiency, and to stimulate a bustling capitalist economy. The film underscores the move toward capitalism and modernity by Pablo and Lupita’s desire for upward social mobility and consumerism (for example, Lupita wants Pablo to have his own car). In addition, the inciting incident for the characters’ literal and figurative journeys is the discontinuation of Tram 133 and its replacement with a newer model. The rich passengers near the end of the film also point to Mexico’s interest in international business, foreign investment, and tourism. Of course, all of this modernization has its cost. As the Professor explains in his socialist discourse, the working class suffer the first blows of inflation and other economic injustices. In addition, the working-class Mexicans still cherish their old traditions, from raising live chickens to myriad holiday festivals. The tram system itself epitomizes tradition, where the whole city comes together in fellowship before or after work. This juxtaposition is fleshed out in the tension between the modern obsession with time and schedules (such as the tram route) and the slow-moving appreciation, or nostalgia, for old ways and old stories (such as the performance of Genesis in the Christmas pageant).

Illustrative Moment: Final Narration There is a panoramic, long-distance shot of the station exit. All four workers and Lupita exit into the darkness. Caireles turns back to kiss Lupita. We see the quintet walk up the street as the male narrator’s voiceover describes the rhythm of the city. He admits that while this story may not seem important in the grand scheme of things, it does trace the lives of these characters. The narrator declares that there



are thousands of small stories that make up the heart of the city. In this final scene, Buñuel and Alcoriza resolve (to an extent) the tension between modernity and tradition. In some respects, modernity has won the day—Tram 133 will still be discontinued, and Caireles and Tarrajas may lose their jobs. The city will keep embracing investment, renovation, and efficiency. However, the characters have succeeded in retaining their own lives and traditions: the drivers managed to give a free ride to their compatriots, and Lupita has decided to choose love (Caireles) over bourgeois stability (Pablo). And, as the narrator asserts, every individual's story matters.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Do you consider this film a comedy or drama? Why?
2. How does Buñuel's past socialist and communist ideology creep into the themes of the film?
3. What is the purpose of the narrations at the beginning and end of the film?
4. Do you consider Mexico City or Tram 133 (or both) as other characters in the film? How so?
5. How do you interpret the word "illusion" in the title? Do the characters refuse to accept reality?