

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE PHANTOM OF LIBERTY / Le fantôme de la liberté (1974) 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, *The Phantom of Liberty* (1974). As Buñuel's second-to-last completed film, *Phantom* is often grouped with other Buñuel films that have a similar style, theme and sensibility—especially *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972) and *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977).

Film *The Phantom of Liberty* (1974) is one of the few Buñuel films in color and one of several films in French. As with most of his French films made after 1965, Buñuel co-wrote the screenplay with Jean-Claude Carrière and cast several of his favorite French actors, including Julien Bertheau, Michel Piccoli, and the character actress Muni. Unlike his other French offerings, however, 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. While *Phantom* does not really have a plot, Buñuel and Carrière create a bricolage of random scenes that satirize the rigidity of social conventions.

Background Along with being one of Buñuel's last films before his death in 1983, *Phantom* is a good exemplar of the director's productions of the 1970s. Many scenes were shot on sight in Toledo, Spain, with others were filmed in the streets of Paris. 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. *Phantom* was nominated for Best Foreign Language Film by the U.S. National Board of Review 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* (1969) and *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972). In addition to these two films, Buñuel alludes to specific scenes or tropes from his 1960s classics *Exterminating Angel* (1964) and *Belle du Jour* (1967).

CHARACTERS (grouped by scene / order of appearance)

Napoleonic Soldier	Frenchman who falls in love with the dead St. Elvira
Mr. Foucauld	bourgeois father #1 who feels ill
Madame Foucauld	offended bourgeois mother #1
Veronique	the Foucauld's daughter who picks up the "dirty" pictures
Francoise	the Foucaulds' nanny
Nurse	woman who gets stranded at the inn
Father Gabriel	head monk at the inn
Francois de Rougemond	adolescent at the inn who is in love with his aunt
Aunt	late middle-aged woman who is in love with her nephew
Monsieur Berman	masochistic businessman and hatter at the inn
Madame Rosenblum	Berman's work colleague and dominatrix-lover at the inn

Military Instructor	the professor who teaches policemen about polygamy
Gunman	assassin who is both convicted and freed
Dr. Pierre Pasolini	the medical doctor who diagnoses Legendre's cancer
Comisar	policeman who looks for Aliette Legendre
Commissioner 1	head policeman who searches for his dead sister
Commissioner 2	"other" head prefect who appears at the end of the film
Monsieur Legendre	bourgeois father #2 with liver cancer
Madame Legendre	bourgeois mother #2
Aliette Legendre	Legendre's daughter who is both "there" and "missing"

SYNOPSIS

As an extremely absurdist satire, *The Phantom of Liberty* lacks any discernible plot-line. Rather, Buñuel strings together a collection of disconnected scenes, each one with an almost entirely new set of characters and situations. Despite the wild variance in settings and situations, there are a few connecting threads thematically, including the subversion of social norms and institutions, and the exploration of sexuality and bodily functions (see the THEME section below).

The scenes can be grouped into four main sequences, although there are also shorter scenes that have no relevance to the four principal situations. The first "storyline" is that of the Foucauld family, in which the pre-teen daughter has an encounter with a pedophile on the playground, then brings home dirty pictures to her parents. The second sequence involves a series of encounters among guests at an inn. There are four Carmelite monks who engage in conversation and poker with a young nurse, a sexual tryst between an older woman and her nephew, and a couple from out of town who enjoy sadomasochistic games.

The third sequence strings together multiple scenes with teachers, military men, policemen/commissioner-prefects, and judges. There are two classrooms: a professor teaching middle-age-policemen, and a school principal interacting with nine-year olds. Policemen watch as a gunman shoots multiple passersby from a hotel window. The gunman is eventually arrested, tried, and convicted in court, yet he walks out of the courthouse free as a bird.

The final sequence brings in another bourgeois family drama. The Legendres have a "missing" daughter, and Mr. Legendre may die from cancer of the liver. These issues are partially resolved when Commissioner 1 "finds" the missing girl. However, the final scenes of the movie dissolve into chaos once again, as Commissioner 1 plans for a sting operation at a zoo with the "other" Commissioner, then proceed to shoot at an ostrich.

SCENES

Napoleonic Invasion of Madrid As the opening credits roll, we see Goya's painting *The Third of May*, which shows the execution of Spanish renegades by Napoleonic troops in 1808 (the French had occupied Madrid, and the *madrileños*-residents of Madrid-had revolted and fought back against Joseph Bonaparte's invasion). A prescript appears over the painting and indicates that the beginning of the film depicts the invasion of Toledo during the same occupation. Then, the prescript mentions that the following scene is inspired by a Romantic-era poem. We see a group of injured Spaniards being led across a plaza by Napoleonic troops in uniform. A firing squad marches across the plaza next, then gets into formation. Several Spaniards line up against the wall and are shot.



French Troops in the Cathedral of Toledo A large group of Napoleonic soldiers occupy the outer and inner chambers of the cathedral of Toledo. They meander around, singing and drinking wine. One general sits in a throne-like chair and drinks out of a goblet. He walks drunkenly to the altar and eats the "bread" of the Eucharist out of



a bigger silver goblet. He offers the goblet and the host to another soldier, who eats it nonchalantly. The general then crosses to the front of the church, where two statues sit—a man and a woman in prayer. The general becomes transfixed by the female statue and leans in to kiss “her.” As his lips make contact, the male statue raises his arm and knocks the general over the head. The soldier collapses, unconscious.

Desecrating Saint Elvira’s Tomb The frame fades from the unconscious general to the boots of several other soldiers pulling up a coffin from the cathedral catacombs. A female narrator starts to describe the scene. She explains that the troops exhumed the coffin of Saint Elvira, whose image in the statue had entranced the captain. The coffin is placed right in front of the statues, which served as headstones for the tombs of Saint Elvira. The captain, now with a bandaged head, uses his sword to pry open the rotting wood of Saint Elvira’s tomb. He then places his sword on top of the praying hands of the male statue. The camera closes in on the beautiful face of Saint Elvira, perfectly preserved a la Sleeping Beauty. The female narrator explains how well her body was preserved and that it was widely considered to be a miracle. At the edge of the frame, however, the viewer sees that Elvira’s left hand is detached and the flesh of the wrist has indeed rotted.



Nanny on the Park Bench The close-up on Saint Elvira’s upper body disappears abruptly and is replaced with a shot of a contemporary (1970s), middle-aged woman reading aloud on a park bench. The viewer realizes that this woman was the narrator of a few moments ago. She reads a few more lines and stops at the word “paraphernalia.” Confused, she asks another woman on the bench to explain the vocabulary. The second woman explains that paraphernalia has different definitions and connotations in different languages.



The Pedophile’s Pictures A creepy gentleman in glasses stands at the bottom of a slide on a playground. He looks at the children’s legs as they slide down. The two girls on the bikes pull up to the playground and climb the ladder to the top of the slide. The pedophile guides them to another area of the playground and tells them that he has special pictures to show them. The two girls look at the developed photos with curiosity and smile mischievously at their supposedly dirty content. The pedophile places the pictures in Veronique 1’s coat pocket and tells her not to show them to anyone. The nanny approaches in time to see the end of the interaction. The gentleman tips his hat to the nanny, who bows her head slightly.



Madame Foucauld Admonishes Veronique and Françoise Veronique runs in from her outing and hands the envelope with the supposedly dirty pictures to her parents, then leaves the living room. Her mother reassures to her husband that he should get a “checkup,” and the husband chides her for not using the proper French terminology of “general exam.” The mother opens up the envelope and reacts in shock to the developed pictures. She calls out for the nanny, Françoise. Veronique and Françoise answer, and Mme. Foucauld criticizes the nanny for not noticing the stranger and intervening.

The Foucaulds Look at the “Dirty” Photos Madame Foucauld returns to the living room, where her husband is peering intently at one particular photo. She sits on his lap, and the two reminisce about a passionate night in Venice when they were young. Both start to become aroused, and they kiss passionately. Their desire turns to disgust, however, as they peruse the other pictures. The camera angle changes from looking at the Foucauld’s faces to looking at the pictures from the back of the couple’s heads. The viewer sees that rather than porn or erotica, the photos are picturesque shots of famous world heritage and



tourist attractions, including the Parthenon and the Arc d'Triomphe, which M. Foucauld deems "obscene." When M. Foucauld looks at the last photo of the Sacré Coeur (a WWI basilica in Paris), he rips it in two in disgust. Curious, Mme. Foucauld tries to grab the last photo. When she finally gets to look at it, she remarks: "You're right...that is too far."

Francoise is Fired Madame Foucauld calls in Francoise once again. Both she and M. Foucauld tell her that she is fired. M. Foucauld tells her to arrange her dismissal with his wife. Francoise tries to protest and explains that she was not part of the interaction, but Mme. Foucauld does not budge. She tells Francoise to follow her to get her last paycheck. After the women leave, M. Foucauld shows his daughter a series of spider drawings, and she correctly names each species.

Animal Menagerie Dream There is a close-up of a silver alarm clock. M. Foucauld winds the clock and sets it on his nightstand as he smokes his nighttime cigarette. He puts out the cigarette, tries to fall asleep, and turns on the light. He pours himself a glass of water and notices that it is 1:00 AM. Mme. Foucauld is fast asleep, but her husband sits upright and watches as a white rooster slowly enters the room. When he looks at the clock again, the time has jumped to 2:05 AM. Suddenly, the bedroom is dark and a woman enters holding a lit candle. She holds up her own smaller alarm clock and looks at the sleeping figures in the bed in front of her—presumably, the Foucaulds. She puts out the candle. The silver clock on the nightstand now says 3:03 AM. A bike messenger appears, gets off his bike, and searches through his mailbag. The messenger throws an envelope at M. Foucauld, who is still awake. The clock now says 4:02 AM. A huge, gray ostrich (possibly a South American rhea) walks in from the door opposite of that which the other animals and humans entered.



Foucauld Asks for the Doctor's Help At the doctor's office, M. Foucauld explains his dream and his other symptoms. The doctor reminds him that he just had a weird dream, but in any case, he may want to see a psychologist. M. Foucauld shows him the actual letter that the bike messenger delivered to him. A nurse enters and asks to speak to the doctor in the adjoining office. She reminds the doctor that she is about to take a personal leave in order to visit her sick father, and she, too, shows him a letter describing her father's poor condition. The doctor wishes her well and leaves the office. She begins to unbutton her white overcoat.



Nurse Stays the Night at an Inn The nurse, now in traveling clothes and a beret, drives her car with the rain pouring down. As she drives through a forest, she comes upon a military tank and soldiers blocking the road. The soldier tells her that the road is out up ahead and advises that she stay the night at a nearby inn. She agrees, and the soldiers let her pass. She enters the inn and asks the innkeeper for a phone. When he tells her the phones are out, she requests a room for the night. While she waits for a room, she dries herself by the fireplace and converses with four monks in red-brown cassocks. They ask about her family, and she replies that she is on her way to visit her sick father. One of the monks with a limp advises that she pray to Saint Joseph for aid. The innkeeper asks her to follow him to her room. He opens the door and places three yellow apples in a row on the table. The nurse begins to unpack her small suitcase.



The Guests at the Inn Interact Three monks ascend the stairs and enter two rooms, with Father Gabriel across the hall from the others. Father Gabriel exits to use the communal restroom, but notices that it is occupied and leaves. A female flamenco dancer emerges from the bathroom carrying shampoos. She returns to her room, leaves the door open, and prompts her guitarist to begin playing. The flamenco dancer starts rehearsing her hand circles with the bedroom door open. Another very tall guest exits his room from across the hall and follows the music to the flamenco rehearsal. He closes the door, agitated, then returns to his room. One monk ascends the stairs carrying water, and the one with the limp emerges from his room to use the restroom.

Prayer, Booze, Conversation, and Games in the Nurse's Room

Father Gabriel carries a wooden altar down the hall to the nurse's room and knocks on her door. When she opens the door, he presents her with an image of St. Joseph hidden within the wooden altar. The other monks also enter her room, present her with rosary beads, and they all kneel and pray together. As they recite Hail Marias, the camera slowly closes in on the altar and the figure of St. Joseph holding the baby Jesus. Then, inexplicably, the altar doors are closed. There is a sudden cut to a poker table. We see the nurse, all four monks, and the innkeeper smoking, drinking, and playing cards in the nurse's hotel room. Father Gabriel puts his arm around the nurse but retracts it quickly. He asks her whether her father worked for the government "in the colonies," but she replies that he never left France.



Incestuous Foreplay at the Inn Meanwhile, yet another set of guests come in from the rain. There is a young man accompanied by a much older woman. One of the innkeeper's female assistants takes them to a vacant room with two twin beds. The young man unpacks and takes a swig of whisky, then approaches the older woman. He holds her hand and bids her to sit with him on the loveseat. She resists somewhat, but agrees to sit with him. When he removes her sun glasses, the viewer realizes that they are lovers, or at least romantically linked. The two profess their forbidden love (and lust) for each other, and we learn that they are aunt and nephew. The woman expresses both anxiety and desire as the two kiss and caress each other on the loveseat.



The Aunt's Naked Body The nephew tries to take the foreplay to the next level, and when his aunt resists, he demands that she undress and show him her naked body. After several moments of stalling and the nephew trying to forcibly rip her dress, the aunt eventually disrobes and gets into bed. The nephew approaches, then flings off the covers after a brief struggle. We see the woman's full naked, and impossibly young, body in the pose of a reclining nude. The nephew walks away to turn off the light, and his aunt has pulled up the covers once again. Infuriated, the nephew presses a pillow to his aunt's face as if to suffocate her. He releases the pressure after a few seconds, then storms out of the room.



The Hatter Invites the Other Guests into His Room The tall guest sees the young nephew leave his room and asks him if he (the young man) would like to join him and his "associate" for a drink. The nephew assents and enters their room. They introduce themselves as Francois de Rougemond, Parisian student, and Jean Berman, hatter from a small town. The nurse knocks on the door asking for a towel, and she ends up joining the conversation. She explains that she is with four gentlemen, and the hatter looks at his assistant knowingly. The hatter and nurse go back to her room and invite all four monks to join them for a glass of port. They accept after the hatter suggests that they take advantage of the "randomness" that brought them together. All eight guests pack into the hatter's room and drink port.



Unexpected Sadomasochistic Performance The assistant sneaks into the bathroom and undresses, then puts on a leather dress and bathrobe. She grabs a rope, leaves the bathroom, and shows the hatter the "weapon" she is holding behind her back. The hatter goes into the bathroom and puts on assless chaps. The nurse, monks, and young student continue chatting about the Congo and St. Teresa, among other benign topics. Suddenly, the visitors see the assistant-dominatrix whipping the hatter's bare buttocks as he shouts for more. The camera abruptly swerves from one face to the next in a series



of reaction shots, with all of the guests startled and disgusted. They quickly run out of the room despite the hatter's pleas that they stay and watch. The monks and the student return to their respective rooms. When the student sees his aunt asleep in her bed, he decides to leave her alone and get into his pajamas. She wakes up and bids him to come into her bed by offering him her arm.

Transition from the Inn to the Military-Police School There are a series of disconnected images in and around the inn, including a close-up of a stuffed fox in the lobby, a waterfall outside, and a panoramic side view of the innkeeper carry jugs around the property. In the morning, the nurse descends, asks if the phone is repaired, and pays her bill. Another gentleman is eating breakfast and asks for a ride into town. The nurse agrees and drops him outside of a school building. He runs towards the building, salutes two uniformed guards, and runs into the classroom. Inside, multiple police officers dance and sing around the classroom. There is the phrase "the colonel is a cuckold" on the chalkboard.

Lecture on Polygamy and Classroom Pranks When the old man (now identified as the colonel and professor) approaches, everyone rushes to their seat. The colonel sees the obscenity but remains calm, then asks a policeman to erase it. He continues to start his lecture on the prevalence of polygamy in other parts of the world. Meanwhile, some of the students ignore the lecture and do juvenile things such as make paper cutouts and pass notes. The lecture is interrupted by other cadets entering and demanding evacuation. Only two students remain in the classroom, and the professor continues. The older student pins a paper puppet on his lover back, and when the professor sits down, he pricks himself on the sharp pin. A general enters and demands that the two remaining students (who are easily 50 years old) sit quietly and listen to the end of the lecture.



Topsy-Turvy "Dinner" Party The professor-colonel enters a friend's home and greets everyone. The hostess's daughter is a cute little girl. One of the guests kisses her and asks how school is going. After pleasantries, they all move to a long dining table with toilets as seats. They collectively remove their underwear, lift up the lids of the toilet, and sit on the toilet seats. They proceed to peruse magazines, smoke, and chat about politics and the colonel's recent trip to Spain (presumably the inn in the Pyrenees). The little girl leans over to her mother and says: "I'm really hungry." The mother chides her by replying: "We don't mention such things at the table." After a few minutes, the colonel-professor gets up and asks the maid discretely to use the dining room. She motions down the hall. He enters, opens up a compartment in the wall, and pulls out a tray of food. He sits down and begins eating, but is interrupted by one of the other guests knocking. He yells out "occupied," and she says "sorry" and walks away.



Careless Driving and Bad Habits A gentleman drives carelessly around curves on a highway. Two cops in hats blow their whistles and pull him over. The driver gets out, and he pays the cops to avoid getting a ticket. The man then continues on to the medical office. The doctor invites him into his private office and reads the results on his papers: he is better than expected. However, the doctor scolds him for smoking too much and warns him that he might end up in wheel chair. The doctor then shows him two x-rays of lungs but evades the patient's questions about white spots. He proceeds to recommend to the patient that he undergo an immediate surgery. The man realizes that the doctor is hiding the real reason for the surgery, and after much probing, the doctor admits that the man has liver cancer. The man laughs at first, then slaps the doctor when he (the doctor) offers him a cigarette.

Aliette is Missing When the man returns home to a luxurious house, he lies to his wife and tells her that his medical tests came out clean. Their conversation is interrupted by a phone call. The woman answers and becomes increasingly concerned. She reports to her husband that their daughter, Aliette, is not at school and has been missing. At the school, the headmistress escorts the couple, now identified as the Legendres, around the grounds. She interrupts Aliette's class, where the teacher is instructing multiple girls. The whole class listens as the headmistress explains the situation. A girl with brown hair comes up to the front of the class and tugs on Mme. Legendre's arm. The girl says "It's me; I'm Aliette,"



but her mother only chides her for interrupting the headmistress. The principal takes roll, and Alette say “present” when it is her turn. The headmistress says, “There she is,” but the Legendres continue to discuss a plan for recovering their daughter. M. Legendre vows to call the police, and he takes Alette out of class.

Filing a Missing Person’s Report At the police station, the Legendres explain the situation to the Commissar with Alette sitting directly in front of him. The nanny also describes the last time she saw Alette that morning, and Alette confirms all of the adults’ facts. The Commissar asks Alette to come over to the desk so that he can describe her in the report. He asks her a series of questions about her age, weight, etc. He then calls in a sergeant to start looking for the missing girl. When the sergeant asks for a description, the Commissioner tells him to study Alette carefully. The Commissar chides the officer for wearing dirty shoes.



Transition to a Mass Shooting In the next scene, the officer gets a shoeshine and there is an extended close-up of his shoes in the stirrups. When the officer leaves, the shoe-shiner moves on to his next customer—a thin gentleman with classes and tweed pants. He has a laid-back bull mastiff at his side. The customer leaves and walks several blocks to a high-rise building. He takes a long case up to the thirtieth floor, where workers had evidently left a renovation project in progress. The man takes out a sharpshooter rifle, aims out of the window, and proceeds to calmly shoot several young women (and a couple of men) passing by in the street. Two policemen look through binoculars and try to spot the window whence the bullets are flying.



The Shooter’s Sentencing We see several people entering a courtroom and the procession of three judges in red robes. The head judge explains the charges as the shooter remains standing. The head judge proceeds to give him the death penalty, but the shooter reacts nonchalantly. When court is dismissed, two bailiffs take off the shooter’s cuffs, and his lawyer lights the shooter’s cigarette. The criminal continues to walk out with the observers unbound. Right before he reaches the entrance, several women stop him and ask for his autograph.



Alette is “Found” Now in the luxurious office of the Commissioner-Prefect, the Legendres enter to ask about the status of their case. The Commissioner happily reports that the police have found their daughter. When Alette enters, M. Legendre picks her up and embraces her. The parents thank him profusely and ask how they managed to find Alette. The Commissioner reads a report about a bomb attack as if it were explaining the Legendre’s case. The Commissioner’s secretary reminds him of the time, and he jumps up, telling the Legendres that he is late for an appointment. The secretary continues reading the non-sensical report.



A Tale of Two (or Three) Sisters The Commissioner rushes to a bar and chides the bartender for playing loud music. When an attractive woman enters the bar, the Commissioner approaches her and tells her that she looks exactly like his sister who died. He explains that it is the anniversary of his sister’s death. There is a sudden flashback to a hot summer day when his sister was alive. The Commissioner hears piano playing from his office and enters another room. He sees his sister playing the piano, naked. He walks around the piano as if he were her instructor and does not react to her naked body. He asks her to play *Rhapsody* by Brahms, and she does so. He drops his cigarette case and crawls under the piano to retrieve it. The camera takes the perspective of the Commissioner under the piano; as a result, the viewer looks directly at the woman’s labia (albeit in shadow) and her legs in fishnet stockings. Despite the scandalous



viewpoint, the Commissioner ignores his sister's body and immediately gets up. The scene returns to the bar, where the Commissioner continues telling the story of his sister's death to her doppelgänger. A phone call comes in from the bar, and the bartender tells the Commissioner that his sister is calling. Perturbed, the Commissioner asks the bartender to quiz the woman who claims to be his sister. The caller gets the answer correct, so the Commissioner runs out to investigate if she is still alive.

Searching for the Sister's Body The Commissioner runs to the undertaker's business and uses his station to gain entry. He walks past the cemetery and into a sepulcher where his sister should be buried. He descends the dark stairs and examines two coffins with a flashlight. The coffin on the right has auburn hair flowing out of it (draped on the side of the coffin), so he proceeds to pry open that one. Before he can look inside, several police run down the stairs and arrest him. The Commissioner declares that he is the police prefect, but they do not believe him.



Two Commissioners The police escort him to the Commissar's office. The Commissioner protests that he is the prefect and explains why he tried to open his sister's coffin. The Commissar tells the officers to take the criminal (Commissioner 1) to the "real" prefect. The commissar then calls Commissioner 2 and tells him that a crazy necrophiliac is pretending to be prefect. Back in the luxurious office with the secretary, Commissioner 2 sits at the same desk as his predecessor (or doppelgänger). Commissioner 1 enters and shakes the hand of Commissioner 2. They sit across from each other in front of the desk and engage in small talk. Both remark that the other has gained weight due to too many fancy dinners. Commissioner 2 talks about his plans to raid the zoo, and Commissioner 1 replies that he had already called in several policemen and swat teams to handle the job. Commissioner 1 warns that some of the animals may be killed, but Commissioner 2 retorts that a zebra's life is worth less than a policeman.



Sting at the Zoo We see a series of close-ups of animals at the zoo, including an elephant's face, a seal, a hippo, and a lion pacing in a cage. Both Commissioners get out of a car at the zoo's entrance. They enter with a swat team, and the viewer hears (but does not see) shouts of a mob or protest, including the phrase "Down with Liberty!" Commissioner 2 commands the swat team to "charge." There is a sound of shots as the camera swirls round and round. When the camera stops spinning, we see a gray ostrich looking around and hear shots ringing out.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

MONSIEUR LEGENDRE Although no character is developed in this film, Legendre has a bit more screen time and tangible activities than his bourgeois counterparts. Legendre is the second father and husband who appears a few times in the second half of the film. Because he is diagnosed with cancer and "loses" his daughter, he vacillates between being anxious and angry.

Anxious Like his counterpart in the first half of the film, Legendre suffers from consistent ennui and a physical malaise. We learn from the doctor that Legendre has liver cancer and needs immediate surgery, yet he hides this information from his wife. This existential anxiety is compounded when Legendre has to wait for the policemen to rescue his missing daughter, Aliette.

Angry While Legendre is relatively patient with the policemen trying to find his daughter, he lashes out at the doctor—first, for lying about his cancer diagnosis, then for offering him a cigarette after warning him about smoking.

COMMISSIONER 1 Like Legendre, the police Commissioner enjoys slightly more development than other one-note characters. He finds the "missing" Legendre girl and plans and executes the raid on the zoo. In addition, the Commissioner grapples with his psychological issues during the last several scenes

of the film: he indulges in incestuous and necrophiliac fantasies regarding his sister, and he faces his doppelganger (Commissioner 2) in the second-to-last scene of the film.

Determined Commissioner 1 uses his station and his detective skills to track down Aliette and plan a SWAT-team attack on the protester-terrorists at the zoo. He shows even greater determination to investigate who is impersonating his dead sister (or at least confirm that she is dead). He becomes so obsessed with the truth that he descends into the dark sepulcher and tries to pry open his sister's coffin.

(Erotically) Nostalgic Aside from the investigation of Aliette's kidnapping, the Commissioner fixates his time and energy on the memory of his sister. He relishes the flashback of her playing the piano naked, and he approaches the woman in the bar because she reminds him of his sister. The Commissioner is nostalgic for his erotic memories and for the Brahms that his sister played.

THEMES

SOCIETY

Social Norms and Institutions Nearly every scene in the film involves a person of authority who does not do their job or does it poorly, with the result that the problem of each sequence remains unresolved. The inept institutions include education, the military, the police, the courts (the law), and medicine. With the exception of "finding" the girl who was never missing, none of the institutions manage to complete their assigned task: Foucauld and Legendre don't get treatment, the students don't learn, Commissioner 1 does not confirm his sister's death, and the shooter is not stopped in the moment of the mass shooting, nor does his execution ever happen. While the institutions do not serve the French people properly, the characters in the film also suffer from arbitrary rules about manners, gender roles, and sex. The characters indulge in taboos frequently despite their fear of outside judgement, and the action goes on without anyone receiving punishment. Although polygamy is illegal in France, the professor's lecture makes it clear that this law as moral judgement does not exist everywhere in the world. Arguably the most severe crimes are those of kidnapping, violent demonstrations and terrorism, and mass murder. Yet, the criminals are either absent or do not receive punishment. The one crime that comes to fruition—the gunman killing multiple victims—only results in the shooter becoming a free celebrity. In this sense, the legal infrastructure does not hold up.

Illustrative Moment: The Empty Sentencing of the Shooter

We see several people entering a courtroom and the procession of three judges in red robes. The head judge explains the charges as the shooter remains standing. The head judge proceeds to give him the death penalty, but the shooter reacts nonchalantly. When court is dismissed, two bailiffs take off the shooter's cuffs, and his lawyer lights the shooter's cigarette. The criminal continues to walk out with the observers unbound. Right before he reaches the entrance, several women stop him and ask for his autograph. Logically, this scene suggests that the shooter has been tried for his crimes, and the head judge clearly sentences him to death. In addition, there is all the pomp and circumstance (and supposed gravitas) of the courtroom: the judges and lawyers wear their uniforms, and everyone rises when they enter. The fact that the shooter walks out emphasizes the empty rhetoric of the judge and by extension, the institutions of law and law enforcement. The punishment is in word but not in deed.



National History and Identity While one could easily argue that *Phantom* is primarily about social and sexual transgression, there is also a subtler emphasis on national identity and the ability to remember and forget history. The very beginning of the film depicts a key historical moment for both the Spanish and the French nation-states: the expansion of France's Napoleonic empire, and Spain's creation of a "modern" constitutional republic in 1812. Both endeavors fail, with Napoleon losing his empire and dictatorship, and Spain going back to Bourbon authoritarianism rather than fostering a new democracy. Film critic Julie Jones also interprets the whipping scene at the inn as a commentary on the Spanish Inquisition, which was at its height when Spain first became a nation in the 1470s, then had a resurgence

in the early nineteenth century. Jones notes that both the hatter and his assistant have Jewish surnames, and this choice combined with the specific act of whipping is meant to evoke the Castilian history of torture. Later, both Spain and France attempted to hang on to their colonies in the western hemisphere and in Africa, which is referenced in the monks' discussion of the Belgian Congo. By the 1970s, however, the age of imperialism had long since expired. This sentiment about past glory (through colonial oppression) may also explain Buñuel's use of tourist attractions as stars of the obscene pictures. The Arc d'Triomphe was built in part to mimic the Roman Empire and glorify Napoleon's reign, and the Sacré Coeur was built in order to commemorate the French victory in World War I. It is entirely possible that the eponymous phantom is the ghost of a glorified national history.

Illustrative Scene: The Historical Painting Comes to Life

As the opening credits roll, we see Goya's painting *The Third of May*, which shows the execution of Spanish renegades by Napoleonic troops in 1808 (the French had occupied Madrid, and the *madrileños*-residents of Madrid-had revolted and fought back against Joseph Napoleon's invasion). A prescript appears over the painting and indicates that the beginning of the film depicts the invasion of Toledo during the same occupation. Then, the prescript mentions that the following scene is inspired by a Romantic-era poem. We see a group of injured Spaniards being led across a plaza by Napoleonic troops in uniform. Several Spaniards line up against the wall and are shot. By opening the entire movie with this scene, Buñuel and Carrière play with the concept of historical truth and narrative. This execution likely did occur during the Napoleonic invasion of Madrid, and the Spaniards resistance to French occupation is a key moment in the formation of Spain's modern national identity. However, the reenactment is also dependent on a fictional short story, a painting, and Bunuel's contemporary, absurdist-surrealist take on the nineteenth century.



PHILOSOPHY

Absurdism and Absurdity Buñuel is frequently associated with surrealism and surrealist images, dream sequences, and repetitive or circular action in his films, and we see examples of all three elements/ styles in *Phantom of Liberty*. Like many absurdist dramas of the mid-twentieth century, Buñuel's characters of his later films go around in circles performing the same tasks and asking the same existential questions. This absurdist frame is particularly at play in *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, where the same group of characters either attempt to eat dinner, walk down the same country road, or avoid terrorist attacks. In *Phantom*, however, there are multiple sets of characters performing multiple useless tasks in a wide variety of settings and circumstances. Aside from doubling (see THEME below), there is no continuity or repetition between scenes, which results in a collection of fragments rather than circular action. As Buñuel himself explained, a "closed circle" is not liberty. Still, the bricolage of fragments lends itself to absurdity in the form of non-sensical or illogical arguments, which often lead to humor throughout the film. For example, Aliette tries to tell her parents that she is there—and not missing—only to be hushed by her mother. Later, Aliette has to help fill out her own missing person's report. There is also absurdity in reversals or conclusions that do not follow the circumstances, such as the shooter walking out of the courthouse despite being sentenced to death, or the dinner guests defecating at the table and eating in the bathroom.

Illustrative Moment: Eating and Defecating—In Reverse

The professor-colonel enters a friend's home and greets everyone. After pleasantries, they all move to a long dining table with toilets as seats. They collectively remove their underwear, lift up the lids of the toilet, and sit on the toilet seats. They proceed to peruse magazines, smoke, and chat about politics and the colonel's recent trip to Spain (presumably the inn in the Pyrenees). The little girl leans over to her mother and says: "I'm really hungry." The mother chides her by replying: "We don't mention such things at the table." After a few minutes, the colonel-professor gets up and asks the maid discretely to use the dining room. She motions down the hall. He enters, opens up a compartment in the wall, and pulls out a tray of food. He sits down and begins eating, but is interrupted



by one of the other guests knocking. He yells out “occupied,” and she says “sorry” and walks away. This scene demonstrates absurdity in that the guests verbally uphold bourgeois decorum but undercut social norms and politeness by participating in a disgusting mass defecation, then eating in secret. As with many other scenes in the film, the dialogue, opinions, actions, or perception of the characters do not match reality. In addition, this particular reversal of order is similar to absurdist theater in that the logical order of events—eating first, then having to go to the bathroom—is upended.

PSYCHOLOGY

Sexual Deviance and Taboos *Phantom* would hardly be a Buñuel film without an uncomfortable exploration of the characters’ Ids and their subconscious sexual desires. Beyond a somewhat indulgent shot of a shoe shining, Buñuel does not engage with his signature foot fetishes. However, nearly every other taboo and illegal sexual activity does appear in this film: incest, necrophilia, pedophilia, polygamy, and sadomasochism. This last category only appears once and briefly, and that is the latter’s assistant whipping him in front of the other guests at the inn. The other categories have greater resonance throughout the film, often because the occurrence of the sexual deviance happens two times in two different situations (see Doubling below). In particular, necrophilia provides a bookend for the film, as both the Napoleonic soldier (in the opening historical sequence) and the Commissioner 1 (in the second-to-last scene) desecrate the coffins of their beloved. In some ways, the characters’ sexual proclivities entail a fear of death and a desire to drink of the proverbial fountain of youth: their desire is focused on children or younger siblings. Other characters try to procreate their way out of mortality or ignore death all together. In this sense, fear and sexuality are closely linked throughout the film.

Illustrative Moment: Delayed Incestuous Intercourse

The two profess their forbidden love (and lust) for each other, and we learn that they are aunt and nephew. The woman expresses both anxiety and desire as the two kiss and caress each other on the loveseat. The nephew tries to take the foreplay to the next level, and when his aunt resists, he demands that she undress and show him her naked body. After several moments of stalling and the nephew trying to forcibly rip her dress, the aunt eventually disrobes and gets into bed. The nephew approaches, then flings off the covers after a brief struggle. We see the woman’s full naked, and impossibly young, body in the pose of a reclining nude (which is a possible reference to Goya’s *Nude Maja* painting). The nephew walks away to turn off the light, and his aunt has pulled up the covers once again. In this scene, both the aunt and her nephew openly express their long-standing sexual attraction to each other and their overt intention to sleep together while they are staying at the inn. The aunt’s reluctance and anxiety act as her ego and superego recognizing the extreme violation of sexual and social norms that is about to take place. In effect, the covers act as the aunt’s superego resisting her Id’s desire to have sex with her nephew. Ultimately, she invites her nephew into bed and their desire is mostly likely consummated.



Doubling / Doppelgangers A common subconscious fear, according to Freud, is the usurping of one’s identity by a twin. Buñuel plays into this fear through several layers of doubling in *Phantom*. There are three explicit doppelgängers in the film: the Legendres’ daughter, who is both missing and found, the Commissioner’s sister, who exists in his memory and in the coffin, and whose likeness appears in the woman at the bar; and the Commissioner, who inexplicably faces “himself” at the end of the film. In the first two cases, the same actress plays all iterations of her character. For the dual commissioners, however, Buñuel literally has two of his favorite male actors, Julien Bertheau (Commissioner 1) and Michel Piccoli (Commissioner 2) face each other. This technique further confuses the viewer and lends itself to the fragmented and absurd tone of the movie as a whole. In addition to doppelgangers, Buñuel also pairs up situations and circumstances. There are two similar bourgeois families, both with ill fathers and victimized little girls. Two men in power indulge their necrophiliac fantasies. Two teachers speak to their students in the classroom. On a meta level, Buñuel and Carrière are doubling themselves by referencing scenes in their films from 1960-1974. The fawning over tombs and the bodies within them (and getting sexually aroused by expired or drugged relatives) references famous scenes in *Viridiana*

(1964), *Belle de Jour* (1967), and *Tristana* (1970). Both the dominatrix and pedophilia scenes mimic similar moments in *Belle de Jour* (1967), whereas the illicit activity in the inn mirrors several scenes from *The Milky Way* (1969). In this sense, Buñuel and Carrière strategically repeat themselves as yet another example of metafilm. Perhaps it is the haunting from other films that constitutes the “phantom” in *Phantom of Liberty*.

Illustrative Moment: Multiple Red-Headed Sisters

When an attractive woman enters the bar, the Commissioner approaches her and tells her that she looks exactly like his sister who died. He explains that it is the anniversary of his sister’s death. There is a sudden flashback to a hot summer day when his sister was alive. The Commissioner hears piano playing from his office and enters another room. He sees his sister playing the piano, naked. The scene returns to the bar, where the Commissioner continues telling the story of his sister’s death to her doppelganger. A phone call comes in from the bar, and the bartender tells the Commissioner that his sister is calling.



Perturbed, the Commissioner asks the bartender to quiz the woman who claims to be his sister. The caller gets the answer correct, so the Commissioner runs out to investigate if she is still alive. The Commissioner runs to the undertaker’s business and uses his station to gain entry. He walks past the cemetery and into a sepulcher where his sister should be buried. He descends the dark stairs and examines two coffins with a flashlight. The coffin on the right has auburn hair flowing out of it (draped on the side of the coffin), so he proceeds to pry open that one. In this sequence, there are multiple potential iterations of the Commissioner’s sister: the one physically in the coffin, her spirit or imitator on the phone, the one in the Commissioner’s memory, and the woman in the bar who is her doppelganger. Three of the four versions of the sister have red hair as a marker. In fact, the only key to the dead body is the lustrous red hair hanging over the side of the coffin. This doubling of the sister lasts presages the Commissioner’s own doubling in the last two scenes of the film.

CHANGE

Time (including Death and Decomposition) As with many of Buñuel’s films, *The Phantom of Liberty* includes frequent references both to the hour and to the passage of time. There are several close-ups on alarm clocks and wall clocks, as well as segments of time (such as the time of appointments or the length of a class). Unlike other Buñuel films, however, the focus on time (at least, in the sense of hour of the day) is completely useless and arbitrary; Buñuel and Carrière refuse to allow for a linear plotline or even forward motion to emerge. In this sense, the emphasis on the hour becomes one of many absurdities throughout the film. On a more philosophical plane, the characters in the film actively fight against the passage of time in order to stave off death and decrepitude. Both bourgeois fathers ignore, delay, and deny the possibility of a terminal illness, and Legendre even strikes the doctor after he (Legendre) is diagnosed with liver cancer. Although both the Napoleonic soldier and Commissioner 1 engage in necrophiliac fantasies, neither man wants to see or acknowledge the natural rotting of the desired woman’s body. Fortunately, both Saint Elvira and the Commissioner’s sister lack obvious signs of decomposition.

Illustrative Moment: Monsieur Foucauld’s Highly Scheduled Dream

There is a close-up of a silver alarm clock. M. Foucauld winds the clock and sets it on his nightstand as he smokes his nighttime cigarette. He puts out the cigarette, tries to fall asleep, and turns on the light. He pours himself a glass of water and notices that it is 1:00 AM. Mme. Foucauld is fast asleep, but her husband sits upright and watches as a white rooster slowly enters the room. When he looks at the clock again, the time has jumped to 2:05 AM. Suddenly, the bedroom is dark and a woman enters holding a lit candle. She holds up her own smaller alarm clock and looks at the sleeping figures in the bed in front of her—presumably, the Foucaulds. She puts out the candle. The silver clock on the nightstand now says 3:03 AM. A bike messenger appears, gets off his bike, and searches through his mailbag. The messenger throws an envelope at M. Foucauld, who is still awake. The clock now says



4:02 AM. A huge, gray ostrich (possibly a South American rhea) walks in from the door opposite of that which the other animals and humans entered. This sequence exemplifies the absurdity of marking time. There is absolutely no rhyme or reason to the order of animals entering the room or the timing of the events taking place. The one crossover into “reality” is the delivery of the letter, which M. Foucauld shows his doctor during his appointment the next day. The fact that other letters in the film carry news of illness and impending death suggests that M. Foucauld may also die of a terminal disease. In this sense, M. Foucauld is running out of time, much like his double in the second half of the film, M. Legendre.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How do you interpret the title of the film?
2. Is the tone of the film based in black humor or silly humor?
3. How are death and sex interwoven in the film?
4. Many critics assert that Buñuel and Carrière are referencing themselves and repeating scenes from their previous films throughout *Phantom*. What is the effect of this auto-referencing?
5. Why do some characters have names and other don't?
6. What is the symbolism of the rooster and the ostrich?