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The Nomadic Discourse of Luis Buñuel: A Rambling Overview

Luis Buñuel has a unique position in film history. This Spaniard, who experienced several periods of exile and who in his late forties changed his nationality to Mexican, is the only filmmaker in the world who has been described (however incorrectly) as the singular embodiment not only of a major film movement like French surrealism but also of two national cinemas, the Spanish and the Mexican. Since his death in 1983 those misperceptions have been corrected, partly through the global success of films by Spaniards such as Pedro Almodóvar, Carlos Saura, Fernando Trueba, Vicente Aranda, and Bigas Luna (all of whom were influenced by Buñuel) as well as by the commercial and critical triumphs of the New Mexican Cinema, especially in works like *Danzón* and *Like Water for Chocolate*.[1] Yet, since traces of these attitudes still remain, it seems timely to reassess Buñuel's relationship to his transnational contexts – Spanish, Mexican, French, and global – and to explore why he remains a pivotal figure in several other discursive contexts: the transition from modernism to postmodernism, the exploration of sound-image relations, the rehabilitation of melodrama as a viable political genre, and the redefinition of narrative as a cognitive mode.

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Le charme discret de la bourgeoisie (The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie, 1972) is the ideal film for exploring these conceptual issues, for it redefined Buñuel as the international auteur who was a consummate master of narrative experimentation. The playfulness of its tone and the glossiness of its visual surface partially disguised the pointedness of its satire – a dynamic that may have helped it win an Oscar for best foreign-language film. Ironically, while this film seemed to usher Buñuel back into the mainstream of the European art film, it actually pushed his earlier lines of thematic and formal exploration to their most illogical extremes. Moreover, it launched a final trilogy of films that enabled his career to end with a form of radical experimentation that matched, if not surpassed, that of his earliest surrealist productions.

This introductory essay is designed to perform two functions: to present my own take on what is most original and compelling in the works of Buñuel (particularly as exemplified in *The Discreet Charm*), and to provide an overview of the essays that follow.

A NOMADIC DISCOURSE: BUÑUEL AS EXILE

I am using the term *nomadic discourse* to refer to a form of mobil mentality one finds in the characters, plots, images, sounds, textual strategies, and life experiences of Luis Buñuel, a filmmaker who spent most of his years working in exile. Although he was born in 1900 in the small village of Calanda where (he reports in his autobiography) "few outsiders ever came,"[2] his later periods of exile always positioned him as paradigmatic outsider despite the differences in context: Paris as an international center of modernism in the late 1920s, when surrealism was a major artistic movement; Hollywood as the hegemonic center of filmmaking practice in 1930, when the conventions for the international sound film were being established; Paris in 1936 and then New York in 1938 as political sites for left-wing activism, where he worked on political documentaries

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or reedited those by others until being ousted by repressive right-wing forces (the German occupation of France and blacklisting in the United States); Mexico as a political refuge for thousands of leftist Spanish exiles fleeing from Franco's fascist Spain in the mid-1940s and 1950s, where he could make commercial movies in his own language within a thriving, small-scale industry; and France as the center of the politicized European art film in the 1960s and early 1970s, where he could make films with bigger budgets, better-trained actors, and more artistic freedom. These various periods of exile were motivated by virtually all of the reasons for which filmmakers have historically left home: to satisfy curiosity, fame, or hunger; to find a more stimulating artistic environment or better economic opportunities; to escape oblivion, censorship, harassment, political persecution, or death. His individual experience of exile represents the whole paradigm.

Buñuel's exile status has led some critics to exaggerate his powers, to see him not only as the singular embodiment of a movement or national cinema but, along with other famous Spanish exiles (such as artist Pablo Picasso and cellist Pablo Casals), as a one-man resistance who "fought the Franco regime from afar, as did other exiles in Paris, London, Mexico and New York, gradually creating in their minds the myth of a country in which no changes ever occurred, one that remained frozen in time in 1939, eternally Fascist."[3] The problem with this vision is that it also turns Buñuel into a frozen figure; it ignores the fact that although he was always a heretic who resisted what he called "the sectarian spirit," he was also a powerful shifter whose meaning changed according to which particular hegemonic system he was working to subvert. Anticipating several postcolonial critics, he inhabited what Hamid Naficy calls that "slipzone of indeterminacy" created by the hybridity of exile, one that "involves an ambivalence about both the original and the host cultures . . . a state of unbelonging, in effect a condition of freedom, nomadism, homelessness, or vagrancy – even opportunism."[4]

Partly because of this "indeterminacy," the Francoist government realized that Buñuel could be used as an effective interna-

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tional icon of Spanishness, an icon they tried both to exploit and repress, especially in the scandals that circulated around *Viridiana* (1961). Buñuel had been invited back to his homeland to make the film, partly to demonstrate to the rest of the world the growing liberalization of Francoist Spain. Although it remains one of the few feature films Buñuel made in Spain (with a script approved by Francoist censors, a story with Spanish characters and themes set in Spain, a cast and crew primarily Spanish, and even partial financing from Spain), and although it succeeded in winning both the prestigious Palme d'Or and the Society of Film Writers award at the 1961 Cannes Film Festival, as soon as *Viridiana* was denounced by the Vatican for sacrilege, it was immediately banned in Spain. The film's nationality suddenly was forced to change from Spanish to Mexican, as its director's had earlier in 1949.

Buñuel's career forces us to see that neither a national nor an auteurist context alone is sufficient for understanding the full resonance of his work.[5] His films demand a transnational perspective – one that considers the national-global interface. That is why the contributors to this anthology represent a diverse array of nationalities. His films also reward an engagement with theory, for despite Buñuel's avowed resistance to theoretical orthodoxy, his own early experimental work as a surrealist demonstrated how productive his use of the then relatively new psychoanalytic theory could be.

A PROLEPTIC DISCOURSE: BUÑUEL AS VISIONARY

The primary goal of this anthology is not to historicize Buñuel's work but to do the reverse: to highlight its *proleptic* power, its uncanny ability to prefigure future directions both in theory and filmic experimentation. That is one reason why Buñuel's work is so resistant to obsolescence – why its meanings are so mobile and nomadic, why it always challenges us to catch up with its experimentation. Like his restless characters strolling

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down an abstract highway in *The Discreet Charm* (a recurring image that prefigures the hypnotic framing image of Bill Pullman driving relentlessly forward on an abstract two-lane blacktop in David Lynch's experimental 1997 feature, *Lost Highway*), Buñuel's work always moves confidently into an uncertain future, shifting from one cultural and historical context to another while retaining its power to shock spectators out of their bourgeois complacency.

Even Buñuel's earliest experimental films, *Un chien andalou* (An Andalusian Dog, 1929) and *L'âge d'or* (The Golden Age, 1930) can be read productively not only against the surrealist movement of Paris in the 1920s and its reliance on Freud's dreamwork theory, but also, as Linda Williams persuasively demonstrated in *Figures of Desire* (1981), against Lacanian psychoanalytic theory of the 1960s and 1970s and its theorization of desire, which was influenced by the surrealists as well as by Freud.[6] A collaborative effort with his fellow Spaniard, surrealist painter Salvador Dali, *Un chien andalou* still remains one of the best dramatizations of that tension between the desire to immerse oneself totally in the raw perceptions of subjective dreams and the drive to narrativize them, that is, to provide a rational interpretation that tames their corrosive power. As Buñuel and Dali put it in the leaflet they distributed at the film's Paris debut, "NOTHING, in the film, SYMBOLIZES ANYTHING. The only method of investigation of the symbols would be, perhaps, psychoanalysis." Like other orthodoxies (such as Catholicism, communism, and even surrealism) to which Buñuel refused to submit himself totally but which profoundly marked him nevertheless, psychoanalysis frequently came under his attack, even though he was significantly influenced by Freud's method of interpreting dreams: its attentiveness to concrete sensory perceptions, repetitions, juxtapositions, and discontinuities and its suspiciousness of the drive toward linear narrative and rational explanation.

In *L'âge d'or*, one of the first sound films made in France, Buñuel experimented with sound-image relations (just as Alfred

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Hitchcock was then doing in England, Fritz Lang in Germany, and Sergei Eisenstein in the Soviet Union), but in his case he called attention to the ways in which these sensory channels were being gendered, as feminist film theorists like Mary Ann Doane, Kaja Silverman, and Amy Lawrence would later do in the 1980s and early 1990s.[7] Like Eisenstein, Buñuel experimented with disjunctive relations between sound and image – to enhance the power not of montage (as in the case of Soviet expressionism) but of subversive desire, what the surrealists called *l'amour fou* (mad love). Rejecting the reassuring redundancy and realism of a unifying synchronization sought by Hollywood, Buñuel explored an acoustical expression of subjectivity that could represent the kind of split subject that had been theorized by Freud – one constituted through two different language systems: the primary process language of the unconscious that worked toward immediate gratification versus the more linear, rational language of secondary revision used by the ego. Thus, in *L'âge d'or* when the "off camera" interior monologues of his outrageous lovers ("the first time spoken thoughts were used in film") help block the physical consummation of their passion, it was as if film's new capacity for sound were being used to postpone the gratification demanded by the driving materiality of the visual image. According to Buñuel, "The characters are seated in a garden, but the dialogue indicates they are in a bedroom. . . . 'Move your head closer, the pillow is cooler over here. Are you sleepy?' "[8] This conversation transports them to some imaginary future that takes the edge off their desire. Yet this acoustic subjectivity could also function subversively in service of primary process thinking, for earlier in the film it features disjunctive animal cries that help express the two-way flow of intersubjective desire across traditional barriers of gender (the desiring male pursuing the desired female) and sensory channels (the erotic image heightened by an accompanying and thereby subordinate musical track).

In one sequence (which occurs shortly after the lovers had been found wallowing in the mud noisily making love a few

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yards away from an official ceremony in progress, heavily attended by the bourgeoisie), the lustful male (Gaston Modot) is being led by his bourgeois captors through the streets of the imperial city. As if anticipating the perceptions of contemporary cultural theorists who have linked the mobile gaze of window shopping in modernist arcades with the visual dynamics of early cinematic spectatorship,[9] when this reluctant *flâneur* sees erotic visual images of women – first in an advertising poster on a sandwich board and then in an artistic photograph in a shop window – the image dissolves to his beloved (Lya Lys), who is now in her bourgeois mansion with her mother. Consistent with traditional classical cinema, this visual dissolve positions her as the erotic object of *his* desire, which seems to evoke her. Yet when the mother notices that one of her daughter's fingers is heavily bandaged, we begin to suspect masturbatory activity which is a sign of the female's own desire.

Then, in the longest speech thus far in this transitional sound film (whose earlier sequences function more like silent cinema), Lys begins to describe technical strategies for handling sound at a forthcoming party (positioning musicians close to the microphone to compensate for their small numbers), a juxtaposition that surprisingly links her erotic desire to the new fetishized apparatus that controls the sound track. This association is strengthened when she retreats to her bedroom and finds a huge cow (wearing a bell around its neck) seated on her bed (one of Buñuel's most amusing surrealistic jolts). What is equally surprising is that Lys seems accustomed to finding the animal there. Yet in her current state of aroused desire the tinkling bell acquires a new function, helping to evoke an image in her boudoir mirror of a sky full of moving clouds, out of which emerges the stirring sound of wind. Her acoustical experience (of cowbell and wind) suddenly brings forth the image of her lover (just as her image was earlier evoked by his erotic gaze), thereby completing the circle of intersubjective desire. Over this image of her strolling lover we continue to hear the tinkling cowbell and stirring wind, now joined by a barking dog, a constructed "natural" ca-

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cophony that expresses (or arouses) an erotic ecstasy, which reaches an acoustical climax, presumably experienced simultaneously by both lovers, despite their physical separation in space. Hence, like Doane, Buñuel demonstrates the power of the sound track to smooth over spatial gaps – not for the purpose of creating an illusory narrative continuity as in Hollywood cinema but to heighten the intensity of subjective desire and the subversive power of *l'amour fou*. He demonstrates that the desiring machine (like its analogue, cinema) is accessible to both genders and capable of using any sensory channel.

Consistent with the arguments of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri in *Anti-Oedipus*, the subversive power of this desiring machine is not restricted to the domestic realm of the patriarchal family; rather, it is a mode of imagination that permits total freedom and is capable of threatening the whole bourgeois order.[10] As Buñuel put it in defending the film's final subversive figure, a conflation of Jesus Christ and the Marquis de Sade (who was a hero of the surrealists): "The imagination is free, but man is not."[11] The fact that *L'âge d'or* was banned for nearly half a century demonstrates the lasting power of its subversiveness.

Buñuel's first Spanish film, *Las hurdes* (also known as *Tierra sin pan* and *Land without Bread*, 1932), had the distinction of being banned both by the Republican government (which was in power when the film was made) and by Franco's right-wing Nationalist government (which displaced it after winning the Spanish Civil War). Both political sides agreed that this documentary about an impoverished region depicted Spain in a very bad light.[12] It is the film's ironic voice-over (cowritten with Pierre Unik) that makes this documentary surreal, for, while sympathizing with the poor inhabitants and implicitly criticizing isolated absurdities, its tone is patronizing and emotionally detached (an inadequacy underscored by the use of Brahms's Fourth Symphony as background music). Not only is the commentary contradictory and pseudoscientific, but it is also politically impotent for it fails to address the economic inequities that cause the Hurdanos to live and die in such misery. Yet, despite

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its absurdity, on screen we are still confronted with devastating visuals, including haunting images of starving children. The juxtaposition frequently makes some spectators laugh, perhaps, as Buñuel suggests, to relieve their own distress and feelings of impotence. They laugh not at the misery of the Hurdanos but at the incongruity between image and commentary – a dynamic that enables Buñuel to call *Las hurdes* "the least gratuitous film I have made."[13] We know this commentary was vital to the film's conceptualization for, before the sound track was added in 1936, Buñuel used to read it aloud at screenings.

This incongruity between image and sound track (both the commentary and music) also enabled the film to parody ethnographic filmmaking even before it was widely perceived as a genre. According to F. T. Rony, in early ethnographic films such as R. C. Nicholson's *The Transformed Isle* (1920); Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Moana* (1926); Léon Poirier's *La croisière noire* (The Black Cruise, 1926); Meriam C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack's *Grass* (1925) and *Chang* (1927); and H. P. Carver's *The Silent Enemy* (1930), this genre was infused with a "redemptive potential" that excused colonizers (including anthropologists and ethnographic filmmakers) for the various forms of misery and exploitation that were inflicted on subject people.[14] Although Buñuel's film operated on the register of class rather than that of race or ethnicity, it was precisely this "redemptive potential" that his parody destroyed. Thus, his "proleptic parody" enabled him to prefigure the new postmodernist anthropology and reflexive documentaries of the 1970s and 1980s that would question the ideological position of the traditional complacent ethnographer.[15]

Las hurdes was not Buñuel's only film to utilize proleptic parody. Also focusing primarily on class issues, his 1962 Mexican feature *El ángel exterminador* (The Exterminating Angel) parodied the disaster film before it was widely perceived as a genre.[16] Here the privileged members of Mexico City's haute bourgeoisie are trapped in a drawing room following an elegant dinner party, while their servants are just as inexplicably seized with a desire

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to flee. Their mysterious inability to leave the room is experienced as a failure of will – perhaps no more mysterious than the one that prevents citizens from changing the totally corrupt economic, social, and political system on which their privileges (as well as the miseries of the servants and the Hurdanos) are based. The thin veneer of civilization quickly breaks down and these bourgeois guests descend into a brutal savagery, breaking down walls to get at water pipes, committing suicide and demanding the sacrificial death of the host, and turning to magic, dreams, and narrative for consolation and release – a scenario that has many similarities with that of *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, released a decade later.

What makes *The Exterminating Angel*, like *Las hurdes*, so visionary is Buñuel's ability to explore the ideological implications of these emerging genres, particularly with respect to the power relations between insiders and outsiders. That is why they engage many issues that were to be addressed by later theorists. In the case of *The Exterminating Angel*, they include issues that would be pursued by French narratologists (like Roland Barthes and Gerard Genette) in the 1970s and 1980s, for this is the first of several Buñuel films in which humor depends on a serious engagement with narrative theory.[17] Buñuel plays with the subversive potential of repetition and its paradoxical ability to avoid narrative closure while appearing to fulfill it. As in *Un chien andalou*, we are confronted with a series of incongruous perceptions that raise unanswerable questions: for example, why are certain scenes repeated without the characters noticing them, why are there visual discontinuities in backgrounds, why are sheep and a bear wandering through an elegant mansion, why is there no motivation for the guests' inability to leave the room? Like the guests, we have a strong desire to find a rational explanation that will free us from the anxiety aroused by such disturbing questions.

This cognitive struggle is even dramatized in the plot: at one point, the character known as "the Virgin" commands everyone to stand still, for she claims they are all standing in precisely the

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