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CINE MEXPERIMENTAL CINEMA

Ensayo de un cineasta

"Buñuelian" has become synonymous in film studies with Freudian symbols, religious transgression, taboo situations, and disruptive visual moments. The films of Luis Buñuel do their best to render the uncanny through sound and image. A truly revolutionary filmmaker, he was one of the first to expand cinema's connections to unconscious expression, the prime influence being psychoanalysis.

Buñuel's tenure in Mexico and his cinematic contributions would leave a notable impression on the generation of filmmakers that evolved out of the film journal *Nuevo Cine*, the *Concursos* and the super-8 movement of the seventies. A

later generation would contest the conditions--short production schedules, lack of autonomy for the directors--that

Buñuel managed to circumvent and usurp. Speaking in front of an audience at UNAM in 1953, Buñuel critiqued a cinema limited by stilted formulas and false sentiment:

Authors, directors, and producers take great pains not to disturb our peace of mind, and they keep the marvelous window of the screen closed to the liberating world of poetry . . . Their approach is, of course, sanctioned by conventional morality, official censorship, and religion; it is ruled by good taste, and seasoned with an innocuous humour together with all the other prosaic imperatives of reality.²⁵

Through lecture appearances, interviews and international festivals, Buñuel's experiments in form helped to resuscitate the lapsing cinema. His presence in the emerging community of young filmmakers was expressed most perversely when Alberto Isaac asked him to perform as the village priest in *En esta pueblo no hay ladrones* (1965).

Associated with the French Surrealist

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movement in the nineteen-thirties, Luis Buñuel played a key role in early avant-garde cinema. However, before meeting André Breton and his group, Buñuel had been immersed in a literary and artistic scene in Madrid known collectively as the "Generation of 1927." Most of the players schooled together at the *Residencia de Estudiantes* and lounged at the same cafe.

Among the most noteworthy were Buñuel, Federico García Lorca, and Salvador Dalí. Particular to the Spanish wave of Surrealism was a fascination with a national literary phenomenon, the picaresque novel. This interest in the debased rogue would remain a constant in Buñuel's career, both within and outside of Spain. Much later, García Lorca would be a key factor in Buñuel's relocation to Mexico. In 1947, the producer Denise Tual invited the filmmaker to Mexico to adapt García Lorca's *La Casa de Bernarda Alba* for a production in France. Due to problems with the rights, the project was never realized. Nevertheless, Buñuel wound up staying in Mexico for the following two decades.



Luis Buñuel's Mexican period has been treated by some critics as fraught with stylistic inconsistencies, and by others as uplifted by the inspiration of the nation.

According to one of his many biographers, his work in Mexico was a symbiotic joining of his identity with the cultural backdrop:

The simple fact of going to Mexico was decisive in Buñuel's rediscovery of his road. Not only the idiom and the race, but the physical types, the dry and dusty landscape, the impassioned speech, the attitudes to life and death, the religious problem, the social structure which he attacked, all combined to restore him to conditions in which he could be himself.

From the very first film his personality and his Spanishness were engaged, while he observed, understood and analyzed the idiosyncrasy of the Mexican people with a greater profundity than any of the cineastes who had preceded him.²⁶

Buñuel's films played out his personal obsessions under the restrictions and pressures of commercial demands.

Stressing the need for a more poetic cinema, Buñuel advocated a flexible filmmaking that could function within the strictures of the system, and yet subtly deconstruct the very terms of narrative.

His choice to work within the industry may have been predominantly of economic necessity, but Buñuel did take offense at exclusionary or isolationist practices of the avant-garde that discounted the potential commercial audience. His early comments on this

subject have the Marxist inflection that remained a constant in his satires of bourgeois values. Critics often mention Buñuel's uncanny ability to subvert genres with signature elements. The period in Mexico, beginning in 1946, included films that Buñuel had little license to alter, such as the musical with Jorge Negrete and Libertad Lamarque called *Gran casino* (1947) or *La hija del engaño* (1951). Moving from the eccentric spaces of surrealist films such as *L'age d'or* (1931) and *Un chien andalou* (1928) to the territory of commercial film (which some critics have dismissed as a "cinema of complacency"), the films of Buñuel would adapt to the structures of Mexican cinema without losing moments of the inexplicable, the marvelous, or the cruel. The critical response to Buñuel's Mexican years, at its worst, suggests that the rural settings used in some of the films were alien, irrelevant, or just "too Mexican" for an international avant-garde audience. This, for example, is the reason given for the failure of a lesser known film, *El río y la muerte* (1954), at the Venice Film Festival.

The collisions of the real and the fantastic are emblematic of the Buñuelian oeuvre. Hailing an author like Juan Rulfo as an inspirational force, Buñuel reconfirmed his own interest in narratives that poetically position the exaggerated and the banal side by side. In *Exterminating Angel* (1962), a group of swells are trapped at a dinner party, unable to move the plot forward. Rulfo's own dismantling of the folkloric and the vernacular through elaborate use of temporal shifts left perhaps the most indelible mark on Buñuel. Later independent filmmakers in Mexico from Reynoso to Kamffer and Ripstein assimilated this disjunctive strategy.

The cosmopolitan and the picaresque both provided opportunities for stinging satire. His fierce non-conformity and life-long adherence to Surrealist values (especially that of *l'amour fou*) led to a consistent condemnation of institutionalized forms of behavior and worship. As philosophical debates of Mexican identity were developed in the works of Octavio Paz and others, Buñuel was transforming the dominant representations of the rural and the urban proletariat. *Los Olvidados* (1950), his third film in Mexico, combines elements of documentary forms that Buñuel had used wryly in *Las Hurdes* (*The Hurdanos*, or *Land Without Bread*, 1932) with jarring visual moments, such as Pedro's dream of his mother bearing raw meat, that plague the narrative. Inspired by police reports on juvenile delinquency, Buñuel claims to have written the screenplay for *Los*



Simon of the Desert (1964) by Luis Buñuel

Olvidados after spending much time moving among the street gangs of Mexico City.

Simon of the Desert (1964) would be the last film Buñuel made in Mexico before moving back to Europe. An ascetic, predecessor to a *Nazarin* or a *Viridiana*, lives mounted on top of a pillar with little sustenance or human contact. Based on the account of Simon of the Stylites (circa 595 A.D.), Buñuel's *Simon* is confounded by indifferent priests who find his abjection heretical, and by forms of temptation that attempt to taunt his fragile state of being in the world. In an exemplary collision of the lofty and the abject, Buñuel describes that his initial fascination with the scenario was in part based on the image of Simon's feces accumulating around the base of the pillar, "like wax drippings on a candle."²⁷ Sylvia Pinal comes disguised as the devil in shepherd's clothing, decked out in a nineteenth century schoolboy's fineries, and escorting a lost sheep. Anachronisms abound, not the very least being the cataclysmic ending where Simon is ripped from his pillar and jetted to a go-go bar in Greenwich Village. An apocalyptic ending indeed, as Simon transforms from everyday penitent to everyday existentialist in a blink of Buñuel's eyes.

It is fitting that Buñuel's last Mexican film ends up in a bohemian club with an army of youths dancing the radioactive flesh. With the emergence of a cultural milieu centered around the Zona Rosa and its cafes, cine clubs, and galleries, a new generation of intellectuals, artists, poseurs and would-be filmmakers were to spend hours discussing the films of Buñuel, the plight of Mexican cinema, and much more. Buñuel was a figurehead for the *Nuevo Cine* generation, participating in the 1960 conference that would spawn a new film culture. The *Nuevo Cine* manifesto challenged the status of commercial filmmaking by positioning the marginal independents and documentary producers as key to reviving the national film industry. While Carl Mora states that "the effect of Buñuel's work on the Mexican film industry was negligible,"²⁸ it is more accurate to state that his influence only became clear at the end of his Mexican period. For the young filmmakers of the sixties and seventies (to whom the experimental films of the thirties were largely unknown), Buñuel was the most apparent example of someone who had succeeded in doing something different within the context of Mexican cinema. From the upstarts of the *Concurso de Cine Experimental* to the long-haired rebellion of the *supercheros*, Buñuel functioned as a perverse elder

statesman for the subsequent generations
of Mexperimentalists.

25. "Poetry and Cinema," the text of an address delivered at UNAM in 1953, quoted in Ado Kyron, Luis Buñuel: An Introduction (New York, 1963), p. 109.

26. Francisco Aranda, Luis Buñuel: A Critical Biography (New York, 1976), p. 130.

27. Francisco Aranda, Luis Buñuel: A Critical Biography, trans. and ed. by David Robinson (New York, 1976).

28. Mexican Cinema (Berkeley, 1982), p. 91.

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