

Deconstructing and Reconstructing Buñuel

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My three-part video series on Luis Buñuel for the ICA focuses on what are regarded as the three main periods of his career: his beginnings in Surrealism during the 1920s and 1930s; his time in Mexico during the 1950s and into the 1960s; and the period of his international fame, taking off in the late 1960s and continuing throughout the 1970s. Rather than try to summarise all the characteristics and contexts defining these periods, I concentrate on one particular element or idea from each of them, and I develop this idea in the editing process until each video finds its particular form. These three pieces are works of *re-montage*, which first deconstruct the elements of the chosen films, and then re-assemble them in order to offer an analytical perspective. The series is unified by, each time, using a quotation from a particular critical commentator (in order: Buñuel himself, André Breton, Jean-André Fieschi, and Jonathan Rosenbaum) to pinpoint the guiding idea.

The first video, *Buñuel and Surrealism: Revolt Into Love*, is an exploration of two typically Surreal themes or attitudes – love and revolt – and especially of the bond between them. *Las Hurdes* (1933) is one of least classifiable of Buñuel's works, and one of the very few in his career in which his focus is not the idle bourgeoisie. The film seemed like a necessary act to bring to the audience's attention the life in a Spanish region that was marked by extreme poverty, underdevelopment, and neglect. There is a great deal of anger in the film, but it is disguised by a quasi-didactic voice-over commentary that wavers between irony and detachment. While the protagonists of this film (severely ill people, cripples, those with deformities, etc) hardly resemble the bourgeois protagonists of most Buñuel movies, there are some things that remain constant: as the narrator points out, children in school are taught the same lessons as elsewhere ("respect the property of others"). It is precisely against these sorts of social values (both respect and property) that the Surrealist idea of love as presented in *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) and *L'Age d'Or* (1930) arises. Love can be born from witnessing death; it can make itself stronger because everything in the everyday, rational world opposes it; it can be conjured (as happens in both films) through fetishes; and it can fill the screen as a total event unto itself, almost free of any narrative. The gestures and expressions of love in *L'Age d'Or* are, by themselves, enough to sustain the entire film, enough to "blow up the universe".

In the second video of the series, *Buñuel in Mexico: The Logic of Delirium*, I assemble an inventory of particular motifs from the director's rich but generally undervalued Mexican period. These motifs I interpret not so much as the personal obsessions or fantasies of Buñuel, but as clusters of images that express the social ideology or value-systems of the characters – the systems

that Buñuel wishes to dismantle, by exposing their innermost logic. Hence, the motifs I treat – such as the personified Devil and the philosophical conception of evil in *Simon of the Desert* (1965); the crucifix, the crown of thorns, the wedding dress and the rope in *Viridiana* (1961); and the feet in *Él* (1953) – are tracked for the way in which they ceaselessly transform and reveal themselves, under Buñuel's critical gaze. In these three movies, we see characters who are very similar in their delusions of grandeur, even if this delusion manifests itself differently in each case – and are regarded differently by the world, depending on the person's gender and their social position. Buñuel's Mexican films, often regarded as apparently ultra-conventional products of popular genres, are in fact highly complex studies of personality and society, full of an experimentation, not far from their surface, that prefigures his more openly radical, later works.

By the final years of his career, Buñuel had not only achieved a very classical style of filmmaking, but also proved himself to be a very able storyteller, with a great capacity to immediately hook the viewer into whatever tale is he spinning. But this pleasure of telling a story always meets with the more perverse pleasure of constant interruption – interruption of both the course of the story, and the way in which that story is told. In *International Buñuel: Interruption as Method*, the third and final video of my series, I look at the ways and means of interruption in his later work. For instance, in *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977), the sexual advances of Mateo are both encouraged and thwarted by Conchita, who always delays the consummation of their strange relationship. And the story of their relationship, as recounted by Mateo to a group of passengers in a train compartment, is likewise interrupted by various incidents (the ticket inspector, surrounding noises, etc). It is clear that interruption is a method dear to Buñuel's heart; yet it is still surprising to find how many inventive ways he can imagine to practice it. In *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972), the six main characters seem unable to complete a proper dinner; once they begin to eat, someone (police, army, terrorists) always arrives. In the same film, whenever there is a conversation involving politics, the sound is covered by other noises – thus barring the viewer from receiving any background information. In *The Phantom of Liberty* (1974), there is a hilarious scene in which a professor at a Police Academy is unable to give his class due to the constant interruptions. And the very idea of narrative is interrupted, in this movie, by systematically shifting the centre of the story from one character to another. Ultimately, all this interruption allows Buñuel to “literally and figuratively ... get away with murder” (Rosenbaum), in a gleeful parade of killings (real and imagined) and bomb explosions. Luis Buñuel: a true Surrealist to the very end