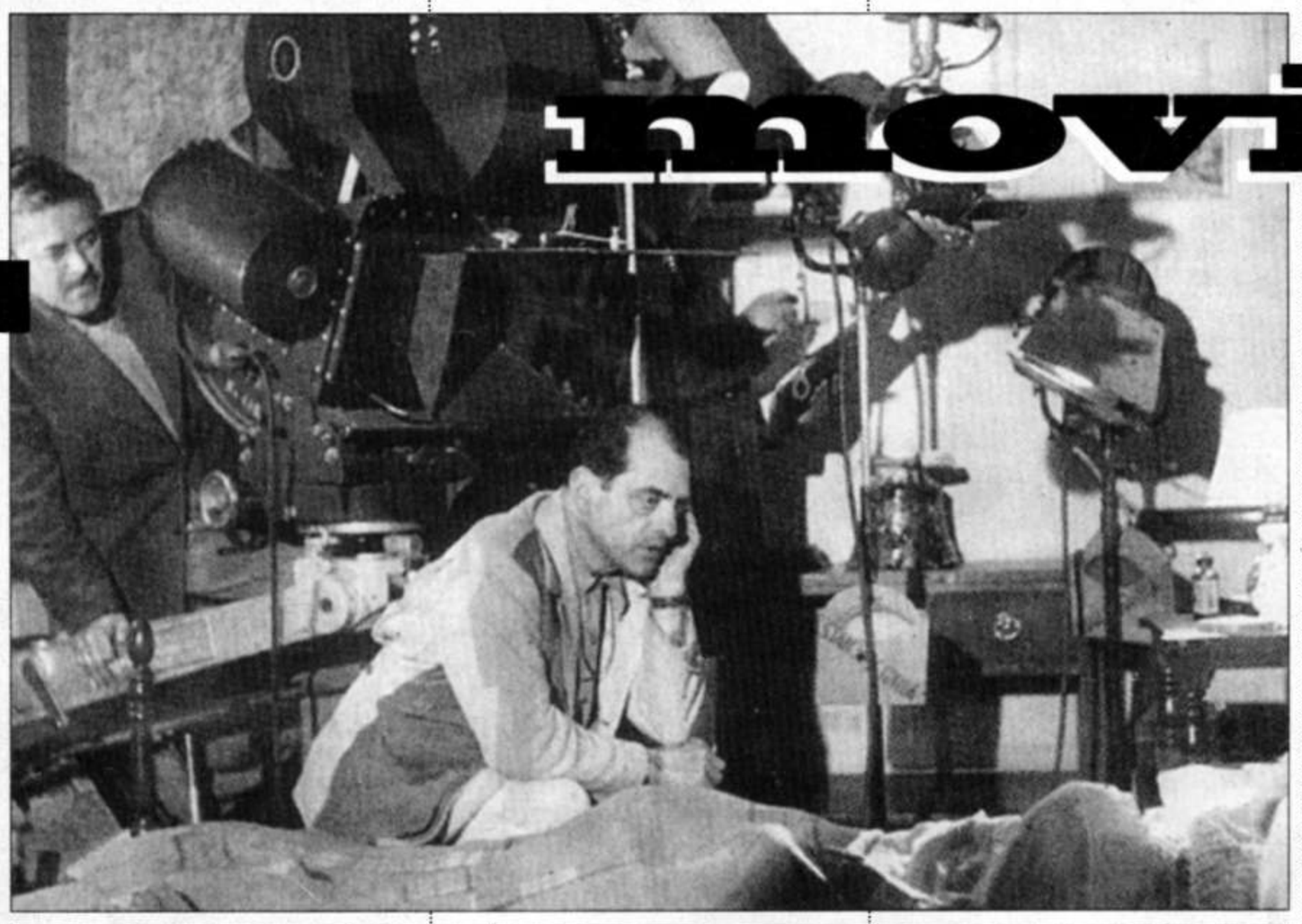
Document Citation

Title	**One-man Armada**
Author(s)	Jonathan Rosenbaum
Source	*Reader (Chicago, Ill.)*
Date	2000 Nov 10
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	42-44
No. of Pages	3
Subjects	Buñuel, Luis (1900-1983), Calanda, Spain
Film Subjects	El angel exterminador (The exterminating angel), Buñuel, Luis, 1962 Simon del desierto (Simon of the desert), Buñuel, Luis, 1965 Viridiana, Buñuel, Luis, 1961 Las Hurdes (Land without bread), Buñuel, Luis, 1932

p. 42-44

movies



BUÑUEL ON THE SET OF "SUSANA," 1950

FILMS BY LUIS BUÑUEL

By Jonathan Rosenbaum

ONE-MAN ARMADA

It seems to be universally agreed that Luis Buñuel (1900-1983) is the greatest Spanish-language filmmaker we've ever had, but getting a clear fix on his peripatetic career isn't easy. The authorized biography, John Baxter's 1994 *Buñuel*, isn't available in the U.S., and the deplorable English translation of Buñuel's autobiography, *My Last Sigh* (1983), is actually an unacknowledged condensation of the original French text. Better are an interview book translated from Spanish, *Objects of Desire*, and a recently published translation of selected writings by Buñuel in both Spanish and French, *An Unspeakable Betrayal*, which includes his priceless, poetic early film criticism.

A more general problem is that Buñuel is not only "simple" and direct but full of teasing, unresolvable ambiguities. A master of the put-on, he often impresses one with his earthy sincerity. A political progressive and unsentimental humanist, he was also, I've learned from Baxter, an active gay basher in his youth, and those who've read the untranslated but reputedly fascinating memoirs of his widow report that he was a very old-fashioned and prudish male chauvinist throughout his life. He was a onetime devout Catholic who lost his faith in his youth and was fond of exclaiming years later, "Thank God I'm still an atheist!" Yet Orson Welles, who never met him, may have had a point when he said, "He is a deeply Christian man who hates God as only a Christian can, and, of course, he's very Spanish. I see him as the most supremely religious director in the history of the movies." He added, "A superb kind of person he must be. Everybody loves him."

Roughly speaking, there are three distinguishable periods in Buñuel's oeuvre: he was an avant-garde filmmaker in France and, to a lesser extent, Spain from 1928 to 1932; he was a popular and commercial filmmaker in Mexico from 1946 to 1962; and he was an art-house filmmaker in France and, to a lesser extent, Spain from 1963 to 1977. But this relatively neat division omits his mainly uncredited work in the mid-30s on popular Spanish features, his 1939 reediting of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* at New York's Museum of Modern Art to be used as anti-Nazi propaganda, his brief work in Hollywood in 1946 on *The Beast With Five Fingers*, his making of three French commercial features in the mid-50s, and his return to Mexico in 1965 to make *Simon of the Desert*.

He made 31 films in all, and a dozen of these—ten features and two shorts—are showing over the next couple of weeks, November 17 through 26, at Facets Multimedia Center as part of a series celebrating the centennial of his birth that's being presented by the International Latino Cultural Center of Chicago, the Mexican Cultural and Educational Institute of Chicago, and the Instituto Cervantes. Also part of the series is Ramon Gieling's *The Prisoners of Buñuel*, a Dutch documentary about the village where Buñuel's only documentary, *Las hurdes* (*Land Without Bread*, 1932), was made and how its present inhabitants view the film; a U.S. premiere, Gieling's film is showing at City North 14 on Thursday, November 16, to launch the series. There will also be personal appearances by Silvia Pinal—the female lead of *Viridiana* (1961) and a prominent character in *The Exterminating Angel* (1962) and *Simon of the Desert*—and a beautiful silent avant-garde feature by Jean Epstein, *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928), will conclude the series.

Inexplicably, *The Fall of the House of Usher* is described in the program as a film codirected by Epstein and Buñuel, which contradicts every credible biographical source I know of. Some references credit Buñuel as assistant director, though according to Buñuel's memoirs, he was only a second assistant—in charge of the studio interiors—and got fired after he made a derogatory remark to Epstein about filmmaker Abel Gance, whose wife was the film's costar. I certainly don't regret the inclusion of Epstein's masterpiece in the program, since contemporary audiences get so few chances to see it. But it shouldn't be treated as part of Buñuel's oeuvre, especially since it was made before he embarked on his own first film, *Un chien andalou* (which was itself codirected, by Salvador Dali), later the same year.

The dozen Buñuel films that are being screened include several of his major works and three of his lesser Mexican efforts: *Susana* (1951), *A Woman Without Love* (1951), and *Simon of the Desert*, which is probably better than the other two. (I haven't seen *A Woman Without Love*—an adaptation of Guy de Maupassant's *Pierre et Jean*, showing with *Land Without Bread*—but in the mid-70s Buñuel himself called it "the worst one I made.") Among the main omissions from the program, I would cite *L'age d'or*, *Mexican Bus Ride*, *El* (*This Strange Passion*), *The Young One* (his only film set in the U.S. and one of two he made in English), *Diary of a Chambermaid* (recently revived in a new print in New York), *Belle de jour*, *Tristana*, *The Phantom of Liberty*, and

That Obscure Object of Desire. These are a lot of lacunae. But most of these titles can be seen on video, and I have to acknowledge that it becomes more difficult to find decent prints of older foreign films every year.

More important, the series includes at least seven virtually unassailable masterpieces—*Un chien andalou, Land Without Bread, The Young and the Damned* (1950), *Nazarin* (1958), *Viridiana, The Exterminating Angel,* and *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972)—and two others that are almost as good, *El bruto* (*The Brute,* 1952) and *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (his other film in English and his first in color, 1952). I've only just seen *El bruto* for the first time, and maybe I'm being hasty in assigning it to the second batch; at any rate, it's easily ten times better than the best work of a good light entertainer like Pedro Almodovar.

■

In *The Prisoners of Buñuel* Gieling goes to western Spain to interview villagers about *Land Without Bread* 60-odd years after it was made there and to show the film in the local square. Many of the residents call it a pack of lies, which isn't surprising given that Buñuel depicted the place as hell on earth, populated by impoverished, misshapen freaks, tortured animals, and diseased half-wits, and so weighed down with misery and ignorance that solutions to its problems, political or otherwise, were inconceivable. (The only local wealth shown in the film belongs to the churches.) But there are also some people who insist that the film told the truth, and still others who take a middle position, maintaining that Buñuel faked part of what he showed. ("Sometimes you have to help truth a little," one of them argues.)

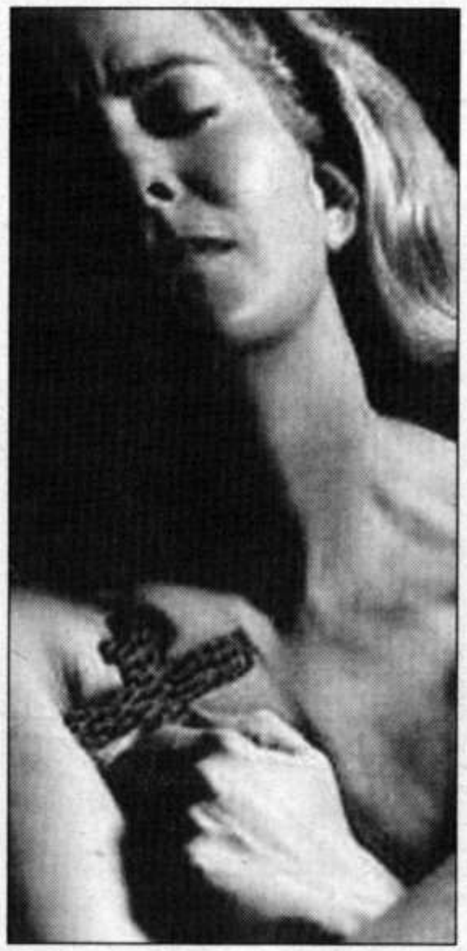
In a way, all of these people are correct, because *Land Without Bread* is above all a metaphysical statement, with all the strengths and limitations that implies. It's also an intricate unpacking of the documentary form rather than a simple adoption of it, and a mockery of touristic observation in general. (In similar fashion, *Un chien andalou,* which opens with the title "Once upon a time," unpacks conventional narrative, and the hour-long *L'age d'or,* made between *Un chien andalou* and *Land Without Bread,* unpacks documentary and narrative; no wonder its first screening in Paris caused a riot.) Buñuel always spoke about *Land Without Bread* as if it were a simple baring of the facts, just as Alfred Hitchcock made similar claims about his equally bleak 1957 docudrama *The Wrong Man.* Regardless of what these men said or thought, they both selected and sometimes altered or even manufactured facts to fit their metaphysical scenarios. Hitchcock invented a miracle whereby a wrongly accused man (Henry Fonda) prays for deliverance at the same moment the thief he was mistaken for gets arrested. Buñuel has a narrator report that the goat we see falling from a mountain to its death accidentally stumbled, yet at that moment we see a blast of gunfire in the corner of the frame, which suggests that it was shot. Some villagers accuse him of even worse contrivances, such as torturing a donkey with bees rather than simply recording such an incident.

LAND WITHOUT BREAD

To some extent, fakery of one sort or another figures in just about every documentary and docudrama ever made. (According to Alan Raymond, who shot the final sequence of the recently rereleased *Gimme Shelter,* Mick Jagger was only pretending to watch a killing at the Altamont Stones concert on the editing machine, because on that particular day the footage couldn't be found.) Gieling brings up this paradox himself when he shows us the village mayor glimpsing Gieling's initial arrival in a van from his office window—a camera angle that obviously necessitated another camera—and then presents the mayor's welcome in two separate, successive takes.

THE EXTERMINATING ANGEL

But apart from such bits of playfulness—including his leaving a bust of Buñuel with the villagers before he leaves—he winds up having more to say about the village today than about Buñuel or his film. It's truly a pity that *Land Without Bread* isn't being shown alongside *The Prisoners of Buñuel,* which offers only excerpts of the 27-minute short as it's being shown in the village square (with English narration and Spanish subtitles, as it happens). Part of what Buñuel is saying with it is that one can't count on finding enlightenment or even simple common sense anywhere. That one has to go to Facets on a different day to see the film *Prisoners of Buñuel* is about seems to bear out this piece of wisdom.



VIRIDIANA

■

Over the past few years several Latin-American friends and acquaintances have expressed their dawning perception that the greatest of Buñuel's three periods is the one he spent in Mexico, the one that yielded by far the most films. It's an intriguing hypothesis, overturning the more common position that Buñuel's extended stint in the Mexican film industry was basically a holding action, a way of "keeping his hand in" while awaiting the opportunity to make his own pictures with relative freedom again. But since this "commercial" period yielded films as personal and as accomplished as *The Young and the Damned, Mexican Bus Ride, El bruto, The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, El* (*this Strange Passion*), *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz, Nazarin, The Young One,* and *The Exterminating Angel*—to come up with only a short list—it surely has to be seen as some-

SIMON OF THE DESERT

CONTINUED ON PAGE 44

movies

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 43

thing more than a period of retrenchment. And there are undoubtedly still other jewels from this period waiting to be rediscovered.

Another way to categorize Buñuel's work—more thematic than geographical or chronological—would be in terms of its surrealist and Marxist elements. One might describe the three initial avant-garde films as Surrealist (as in the official Surrealist group) and pre-Marxist, and the late art-house films as surrealist and post-Marxist; the Mexican films that were made in between include various combinations of Marxism, Surrealism, and surrealism. Part of the power of *El bruto*, a melodrama about a slow-witted thug who works for a slum landlord, is the manner in which an acute understanding of power gradually creates a feeling of sympathy for this bully, whose mother was a maid and who turns out to be the landlord's unacknowledged bastard son. (Though he came from a well-to-do family, Buñuel is one of the few major filmmakers who never shows the slightest trace of condescension toward the poor; it's one of the central facts about his work that makes it endure.) It's equally impressive to see how Buñuel injects surrealist dream sequences into *The Young and the Damned* (my favorite of the Mexican films) and *Robinson Crusoe* in a way that enhances and even clarifies these films' social agendas.

Buñuel's other virtues include an absence of sentimentality, a poetic sense of irony, and a skeptical preoccupation with purity in various forms that can be traced all the way back to his early writing. A 1927 review begins, "Here is Buster Keaton with his latest film, the wonderful *College*. Asepsis. Disinfection. Freed from tradition, our gaze revels in the juvenile, tempered world of Buster, the great specialist in fighting sentimental infections of all kinds. The film is as beautiful as a bathroom, as vital as a Hispano-Suiza." There's also, a Latino friend points out, a preoccupation with ecology long before that word

NAZARIN

came into common use, often signaled by the recurring significant roles played by insects in his films.

Viridiana, the Spanish feature that launched Buñuel's art-house career at the time of the French New Wave, came on the heels of *The Young One*, probably his biggest commercial and critical flop. *The Young One*, which had an extended run at Facets in 1993, is to my mind the most underrated of his great films—an amazingly perceptive as well as sensual look at the American south, with sly notations on the characters that are worthy of Faulkner. Some credit must surely go to cowriter Hugo Butler, a blacklisted American screenwriter who also collaborated with Buñuel on *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (pseudonymously in both cases, to ensure that the films got released). It's too bad *The Young One* isn't being shown in the series, but I'd recommend *Viridiana*—showing with *Land Without Bread* and *A Woman Without Love*—as the ideal introduction to Buñuel. It's a Mexican production that was miraculously shot in Franco's Spain, thanks to the subterfuge of Spanish friends, one of whom (Pedro Portabella, who later became an interesting underground filmmaker) was deprived of his passport as a result. It premiered in Cannes and caused as big a scandal as *L'age d'or* had three

EL BRUTO

decades earlier. But *Viridiana* wasn't suppressed (except in Spain, where it led to all of Buñuel's films being banned); instead it rejuvenated Buñuel's international reputation.

For those who might want to explore the impact vanguard 60s filmmaking had on Buñuel's work, I'd heartily recommend two companion films, black comedies made a decade apart in Mexico and France: *The Exterminating Angel* and *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*. The first feature tracks the creepy and uncanny

UN CHIEN ANDALOU

occurrences that transpire when the wealthy guests at a fancy dinner party inexplicably find themselves unable to leave the room; the second, made in color and with slicker production values, follows a similarly wealthy group of individuals as they repeatedly try and fail to have a meal together. Both films are hilarious, corrosive follow-ups to such 60s art-house favorites about the glamorous rich as *La dolce vita*, *Last Year at Marienbad*, and *La notte*, and they exhibit the kind of stylistic freedom found in the contemporary films of Jean-Luc Godard. *The Discreet Charm*, for instance, resembles a kind of global newspaper, mixing in everything from wry references to *The French Connection* to mordant asides about "Miranda," an imaginary South American country that clearly stands for Franco's Spain. The film also has some of Buñuel's scariest dream sequences. It's astonishing to recall that this picture actually won an Oscar for best foreign film of 1972. After it was nominated, a reporter in Mexico asked Buñuel if he thought it would win, and he characteristically replied, without missing a beat, "Of course. I've already paid the $25,000 they wanted. Americans may have their weaknesses, but they do keep their promises." ■