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Title	Getting what you need: changing surrealist vision in Luis Bunuel's Un Chien Andalou, Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie, and That Obscure Object of Desire
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**Getting What
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By Julie Ahrens**

In 1928 Luis Bunuel, the man with the razor, opened his viewers' eyes to middle-class amorality, complacency and sexual frustration with his first film, *Un Chien Andalou*. This film, made at the height of the Surrealist movement in France with Salvador Dali, is representative of surrealism in its overt use of dreamlike images presented without rational order or meaning. Born out of 19th-century Romanticism and influenced by Freud's investigations into subconscious mental processes, the images of surrealist art were intended to pass directly from the subconscious mind of the artist to that of the viewer with a minimum of logical reasoning. *Un Chien Andalou* consists wholly of bizarre, unreal images and the viewer is continually aware of being suspended in a dream landscape. When we see ants crawling from a hole in a man's hand, it is not necessary to ask "Is it a dream or is it real?"

The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie, Bunuel's 1972 attack on the inane privileged classes, does not appear as purely surrealistic as his first film. Here Bunuel divides the world into the "reality" of six friends' attempt to have dinner together, and the twisted tales of dreams and dreams-within-dreams that interrupt and underlie their outward social niceties. Although we are not quite able to distinguish where it lies, we know there is a dividing line between the dream and the reality in *The Discreet Charm*. This barrier is crossed every time a character begins a story of a dream he has had, or is suddenly awakened to reveal that a preceding sequence was actually a dream. Bunuel punctuates the outwardly placid, yet inwardly violent, bourgeois aims with timeless shots of the group walking along a road. At first there seem to be clear divisions between fantasy and reality, yet it finally becomes apparent that it is impossible to distinguish between the two.

Bunuel's earliest surrealist vision of societal restrictions, a man on the make pulling a piano topped with two donkey carcasses and trailing two priests, becomes a very clear picture of society's obstructions to the fulfillment of natural needs. Here, in one scene, remnants of the affluent, the decadent and the institutionally religious prevent a man's sexual gratification.

The confusing mixture of dream and reality, of lower- and upper-class characters, of clergy and layman, and of motion and stasis in *The Discreet Charm* eventually lead to the same conclusion as the pure surrealism of *Un Chien Andalou*. Basic physical gratifications—eating and making love—are thwarted by manners, marriages and military maneuvers. The bourgeoisie survive the

deprivation and dreamed machine-gun blasts as they continue to walk along the road, untouched and unchanged by their real or imagined situations.

After the release of *the Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* in 1972, Bunuel said: "When I was young the surrealist movement in France was the most violent artistic movement in the world. We were using violence as an arm against the establishment. Now society itself has become so violent that it is hard to use violence to make an artistic statement. So I have done it with humor."

That Obscure Object of Desire, Bunuel's 34th film, abandons the overtly imaginary visions of either *Un Chien Andalou* or *The Discreet Charm*. Here Bunuel gives us no underarm-hair-become-sea-urchin shots, no dead hands, dead mules or dead mothers floating out of the closets of ethereal lieutenants. The world of *Obscure Object* at least looks real, with the exception of the double-casting of Conchita as the fire-and-ice object of Mathieu's desire. The surrealism in Bunuel's newest film is more subtle, yet as forceful in its purpose, as that in *Un Chien Andalou* and *The Discreet Charm*.

The conversions of books into guns, and of the street into a rocky beach, in Bunuel's first film are evidence of underlying chaos and anarchy in an outwardly orderly society. Dream fragments, seemingly not even connected in one dream, are connected on film to convey the clashing forces of romantic love (idealized in the outdoor shot of the woman's back and in Wagner's music), violent lust (the ex-cyclist's attempted rape/seduction and the tango music), and impotence (imposed on the man by society and characterized on film in the piano-pulling shots).

In *The Discreet Charm* these same three elements—an ideal goal, underlying desires and an inability to reach either one—are portrayed by Bunuel with juxtaposed scenes of reality, dream, dreamlike reality, and realistic drama. Underlying desires, characterized by the lust in *Un Chien Andalou*, range in this film from the money-interest of the dope-dealing partners to the attempt of the ambassador to get together with his friend's wife. Socially imposed obstacles to both their proper and improper goals include real restaurants with a dead owner in one and no coffee or tea in the other, a dreamed diningroom that loses its fourth wall to become a stage on which a curtain opens to reveal an audience, and the arrival of guests that twice interrupts lovemaking in the film. The impotence of the piano-pulling man in *Un Chien Andalou* is illustrated in *The Discreet Charm* by the outwardly more "realistic" but no less dreamlike refrain of the bourgeoisie walking on the sunny road. Bunuel cuts to various views of the walkers between dinner attempts. These shots are unusually light and are accompanied by whirring windy noises, occasionally

Photos on previous page, from
That Obscure Object of Desire:

Carole Bouquet as Conchita I (top);
Fernando Rey with the train passengers/audience (center);
Angela Molina as Conchita II (bottom).

suggestive of jet planes or (unseen) traffic, on the soundtrack. Each walking shot gives the feeling of both motion and stasis, as the people continue their trek down the road without ever getting anywhere. We never know whether the walking shots are dream or reality in *The Discreet Charm*. They certainly feel like one of those dreams in which you run and run, but are never able to touch the thing you are running after.

The dreamy surrealism of *The Discreet Charm* blends into the reality of the situations, and only at moments of transition, such as the ambassador's abrupt awakening and trip to the kitchen following the sequence of a terrorist attack and his hiding under the diningroom table, does the viewer pass from dream state to reality state. If *Un Chien Andalou* is composed totally of disconnected dream images, and *The Discreet Charm* is divided into reality and dreamworlds by these recurring—though not always clear—barriers, on what terms can *That Obscure Object of Desire* be seen as a continuation of Bunuel's surrealist vision?

In the beginning of the movement surrealists sought to break down the dividing line between the conscious and unconscious realms with their spontaneous images. *Obscure Object* breaks through this division to become Bunuel's perfect surrealist vision of the world, as the subconscious becomes the outward filmic manifestation of reality. Although he might be dreaming, the whole of Mathieu's situation could conceivably be a dream expressing his fear of physical impotence—Bunuel has no reason to separate dream from situational reality in this film because Mathieu's subconscious desires as well as his fears are revealed in each moment of *Obscure Object*. Bunuel gives us the appearance of objective reality sifted through the subconscious mind of the elegant, middleaged Mathieu.

The story itself emerges as a long flashback, as Mathieu describes, for the benefit of his fellow passengers on a train returning to Paris from Seville, his attempts to possess a beautiful Spanish dancer. In their first-class compartment Mathieu relates a tale of pursuit and endless frustration. One of his companions, a hilarious dwarf who turns out to be a psychiatrist, supplies a running analysis of Mathieu's case as they travel on the track to selfknowledge.

Like *The Discreet Charm*, *Obscure Object* is punctuated by bombings, holdups, terrorist kidnappings and news of world chaos complete with Idi Amin's photograph on the front page of Mathieu's morning paper. While it is a very real part of the landscape, this turmoil is nothing to Mathieu compared to his own inner turmoil provoked by Conchita. Very early on, Bunuel shows the huge explosion of a car (bearing, incidentally, his producer Serge Silberman!); he then cuts to Mathieu, who sees the event only as an inconvenience to

him and orders his driver to hurry up and turn around because he's already late. Even a later terrorist holdup of Mathieu himself represents a mere annoyance to the apolitical protagonist.

Bunuel's more vicious violence in *Un Chien Andalou* and *The Discreet Charm* has settled into a more mellow black humor here, even though the violent acts are at least as prevalent in this film as in the others. Terrorists and revolutionary groups in the film are as much objects of humor as the mouse snapped in the trap and retrieved in front of Conchita's mother by Mathieu's decorous valet. Bunuel is still attacking the clergy, as he does with the murderous bishop who gardens for union wages in *Discreet Charm*, by naming one of the terrorist groups the Revolutionary Army of the Infant Jesus (R.A.I.J.). Other acronyms for terrorist groups recall the Freudian analysis going on in the train compartment: P.R.I.Q.U.E., R.U.T.

The same elements of an ideal goal, an underlying desire, and an obstruction causing impotence defined in the earlier film are blatantly apparent in *That Obscure Object of Desire*. While Mathieu goes from Paris to Seville and back again in pursuit of the sexual consummation of his romantic love, there is a distinct undercurrent of illicit desire in Mathieu's subconscious narrative. He not only wants to penetrate Conchita's supposed virginity, he also wants to bat her around a little. Our first view of Conchita is of a bruised and battered girl—the “pure,” cool Conchita (Carole Bouquet)—being doused with a bucket of water by the sadistic Mathieu. Even the existence of two Conchitas, the “lady” and the “whore,” is Mathieu's invention, since it must never be forgotten that the whole story is unfolding from his remembrance.

The obstacle separating Mathieu from his object of desire is depicted by Bunuel in several ways. Through the illogical dream jumps of the film Conchita continually disappears only to turn up unexpectedly in some other corner of Mathieu's world. He first encounters her as a housemaid in Paris. She disappears just when he approaches her (this time in the form of Angela Molina) and is not seen again until Mathieu is held up by young terrorists—or are they only oddly scrupulous lawbreakers?—outside a Swiss resort hotel. (She reappears as Bouquet; so it goes.) We never know how a maid/hat-check girl with no visible means of support is able to travel in Switzerland or why she continues to reject the advances of a man of wealth, charm, and experience.

The physical obstacles, the leather-laced corset and the numerous iron gates and fences through which Mathieu is seen and separated from his love-object are the trappings of Mathieu's impotent nightmare. Like Bunuel's road people in *The Discreet Charm*, Mathieu is



always running after and never reaching, ever touching but never possessing his object of desire. He is the victim of a surrealist anxiety dream.

The entire tale is almost plausible, almost "real" except for the existence of the two Conchitas. And they could be explained as the different manifestations of a woman so in love with her man that she becomes exactly what he wants at any given moment.

Almost.

There are incongruities in *That Obscure Object of Desire* that can be explained only by the invocation of Bunuel's surrealist vision. After the rotting donkeys and the sliced eye in *Un Chien Andalou* and the bishop's murder of the old man in *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, a little blood on a white lace garment, a few

burlap bags of excrement (the valet's secondhand definition of women), and Conchita's underwear left behind after Mathieu has supposedly only given her a bloody nose in their violent confrontation., force the viewer to question the reliability of Mathieu as an objective teller of tales.

As the seamstress's needle pierces the threads of white lace in a penultimate image, Mathieu—standing outside



That Obscure Object of Desire: the delights of access... the delirium of obstruction... The leftmost pictures feature Fernando Rey and Carole Bouquet; the right, Rey and Angela Molina.

the window with the more ethereal Conchita (Bouquet)—sees evidence of triumph in the trace of dried blood (and excrement?) on the white, hymeneal garment. Bunuel cuts to Mathieu and the lusty Conchita (Molina) as they walk away from the camera and another explosion occurs, separating them from our view. Bunuel follows the flame to the sky.

Despite these two signals of victory, we must know that Conchita remains as impregnable to Mathieu as the bourgeois society must be to the terrorists who attack it.

In 1924 a surrealist doctrine was published espousing the social goal of the formation of a new, ideal reality, or *surrealite*, through the merging of subconscious dream states and ordinary reality. While it failed to produce political revolution, surrealism succeeded in giving birth to a new artistic vision.

While Bunuel failed to defeat or change the complacent middle class through his condemnation of them, his surrealistic view, culminating in Mathieu's double vision in *That Obscure Object of Desire*, has evolved into a highly sophisticated visual parody of his antagonists.

As another anarchist would say:

*You can't always get what you want
but if you try sometime
you just might find
you get what you need.*

—The Rolling Stones

Julie Ahrens prepared this essay for a University of Washington Cinema Studies class.