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Author(s)	J. Hoberman J. Hoberman
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■ Luis Buñuel began his movie career by coauthoring the most influential avant-garde movie ever made, the surrealist "incitement to murder," *Un Chien Andalou*, and capped his oeuvre with a masterpiece, *That Obscure Object of Desire*. Such was the consistency of Buñuel's worldview that much of the latter is anticipated by the former.

Pierre Louÿs's 1898 novel, *The Woman and the Puppet*, the story of teenage femme fatale Concha Perez and the middle-aged Don Mateo she drives to distraction, had been filmed four times before (most famously by Josef von Sternberg as *The Devil Is a Woman*) when Buñuel tackled it in 1977. Actually, it was a movie he had tried to make 20 years earlier—a French producer rejected his treatment as too Buñuelian and gave the project to Julien Duvivier as a vehicle for Brigitte Bardot, *A Woman Like Satan*.

Although Buñuel's version is in many ways the most faithful to the novel (including the hilarious scene with Concha's chastity device), it is also the least misogynist. The very title directs attention away from the perfidy of woman toward something else—namely the fantasy that underlies desire. (The title may sound like a crib from Jacques Lacan, but Buñuel claimed it came from a phrase in the original novel.) Beginning and ending with images of a woman's stained underwear, *That Obscure Object of Desire* is blatantly fetishistic—and also a satire of fetishism. Much of it is related by Don Mateo (Fernando Rey) to a psychoanalytically minded dwarf. That Concha is played by two randomly alternating actresses, Carole Bouquet and Angela Molina, serves to confound any desire for a coherent narrative—although, according to Buñuel, like the hapless Don Mateo, "many spectators never even noticed."

Beginning with the forcibly sundered couple who attempt to reunite for much of *L'Age d'Or*, thwarted desire was a Buñuelian theme: The guests cannot leave the dinner party in *The Exterminating Angel*; the would-be diners never manage to feed themselves in *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*. *That Obscure Object of Desire* is an even more elaborate exercise in frustration. Fate keeps placing Concha in Mateo's path, and she continually appears to offer herself to him. But an endless series of barriers and delays insures that he will never have her—only his desire is real. Buñuel's last testament is a comic version of *Vertigo* (or *A.J.*) and perhaps even more profoundly universal: It's the tale of a person madly in love with something that cannot exist. ■