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Bunuel in Mexico

Amy Taubin

The Great Madcap (Aug. 4-11) ★★★
Daughter of Deceit (Aug 11-17) ★★★★★
Jean Renoir Theatre
100 7th Ave. South

There is a rare opportunity to see four of Bunuel's Mexican films at the Jean Renoir Theatre through the end of August. Although they have been screened occasionally at MOMA and, for one day each, at the Carnegie last year, this is their first commercial run in New York.

The Mexican films, with the exception of *Los Olvidados*, are generally considered minor Bunuel, but these minor Bunuels are considerably more interesting than most filmmakers' majors. The particular limitations placed upon him during the Mexican period (budget limitations, the necessity of pleasing commercial producers, working within conventional narrative structures) coincide with, and thus reinforce, a basic theme in all of Bunuel's work: the contradiction between desire and the limitations which are imposed on it by material conditions, social structure and ideology.

The first two films being shown are low-budget farce melodramas in which the narrative is propelled by a most intelligent heightening of dramatic irony, and in which character and plot are clearly shaped by money, class considerations and bourgeois morality.

In *The Great Madcap*, a wealthy man who has become an alcoholic at the death of his wife is deceived by his family, who are fearful of his squandering the family fortune, into believing that he is bankrupt. When he discovers their deceit, he takes it one step further and tricks them into believing that the faked bankruptcy has become a true one. In the end, the family returns to their mansion where they are free to pursue their new skills of carpentry and cooking as hobbies. Bunuel is far too clear-headed to hold the illusion that the bourgeoisie will become revolutionized by a year's cohabitation with the working

class.

Daughter of Deceit is a rather complex character study of an honest man who, learning of his wife's adultery and believing that his daughter has been fathered by another man, becomes a misanthropic owner of a gambling casino. Twenty years later, he discovers that the child he has abandoned is really his own, and he launches a grand search for her which culminates in a grotesquely ironic scene in which he pelts his daughter (still unknown to him) and her upstanding young husband with bread-balls and olives. In the end, father and daughter are reunited, with the hero in as much distrust of the happy ending as the audience.

Each of these films has one brief amazing scene in which the possibilities of montage are taken outside the conventions of this narrative genre. In *The Great Madcap*, it is the climactic wedding scene in which the sounds of the ceremony inside the church mix with the commercials blaring from the distraught hero's car forming such sentences as "The chastity of marriage is only possible with Sigh of Venus stockings." In *Daughter of Deceit*, the doors of a kitchen cabinet, through which we are watching the young daughter with her foster family, are closed and the screen becomes dark. The voices change slightly and when the doors are reopened, seconds later, about 20 years have passed and the child is a grown woman.

The films are particularly interesting to feminists because of Bunuel's awareness of the oppression of women within the patriarchal Mexican society and his analysis of how women's characters are formed by their position within the social structure and by their total economic dependence on men. The heroines of both films are "good" daughters who, while realizing and accepting their economic dependence, also understand the power of their sexuality and how its energy can be used as a moral force. Because they lack access to power, they have an outsider's analytic lucidity about its mechanics — which is one of their primary tools of survival. ●