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Synopsis

"THE BEST EXPLANATION OF THIS FILM IS THAT, FROM THE STANDPOINT OF PURE REASON, THERE IS NO EXPLANATION."

Luis Bunuel

Eighteen guests are attending a formal dinner party at the resplendent town house of Senor Nobile and his wife Lucia. As the meal progresses, the servants unaccountably leave their posts one by one until only the major-domo is left. Following dinner, the guests adjourn to the music room where one of the ladies plays a piano concerto. When it is time to go, no one makes a move to leave. Instead, they remove their jackets, loosen their gowns, and settle down for the night on settees, in chairs, and even on the floor. By morning it is apparent that they cannot, or will not, leave the room. For some inexplicable reason they are trapped together in this one room. Days pass and their plight intensifies as they become quarrelsome, hostile and hysterical. One guest (Russell) dies and is stored in a large cupboard. A young adulterous couple (Beatriz and Eduardo) lock themselves in a closet and commit suicide. Drainage pipes are punctured for water, a lamb belonging to the hostess is slaughtered and roasted on a fire made from floorboards, the host's secret supply of morphine is given to a woman (Leonora) dying of cancer until it is stolen by an incestuous brother and sister (Francisco and Juana), and a practitioner of witchcraft (Ana) invokes the demons of hell while lapsing into feverish hallucinations. Eventually it is suggested that somehow the host is responsible for the predicament. As he offers to take his own life, one of the women (Letitia) realizes that they are all in the exact positions they were in when their "destiny" began. Obeying her instructions, they repeat their conversations and movements and miraculously discover that they are free to leave the room and the house. To celebrate their salvation, they all attend a mass at the cathedral. When the services are over, they find that — along with the priest and the acolytes — they are unable to leave the church. Once again they are trapped.

Critique

THE N.Y. TIMES. "A satire on empty lives. . . Did you ever have guests come to dinner and then, neglecting to go home, just hang around your apartment or house for days on end? If you haven't had the experience, you can imagine how awkward it would be — how taxing to the fragile bonds of friendship and to the facilities of your kitchen and home. This is the situation that old social needle, Luis Bunuel, has imposed upon a wealthy host and hostess in their elegant Mexico City home in his film, *The Exterminating Angel*. Only he has piled Pelion on Ossa in showing the consequences that might come from having a lot of pompous worldlings and social parasites pent up in one place. . . Knowing Mr. Bunuel and his penchant for scourging society with allegorical whips,



PINAL and RAMBAL

it is obvious that what he is showing us is a symbolical state of affairs. He is showing us the played-out privileged classes in all their stubborn sterility. He is letting us in on the secret of their shocking and shabby rotting away. In his customary fashion, Mr. Bunuel stages this play with cumulating nervousness and occasional explosive ferocities. He whips up individual turmoils with the apt intensities of a uniformly able cast; and he throws in frequent surrealistic touches, such as a disembodied hand coasting across the floor, or a bear and a flock of sheep coming up from the kitchen, to give the viewer little hints of mental incongruities. But my feeling is that his canvas is too narrow and his social comment too plain to keep our interest fixed upon his people and their barren stewing for an hour and a half. This is a case in which the ennui and frustration, so purposely conveyed, creep into the patience of the audience as fast as they suffuse the characters. I suspect this realization is one reason why this film is only now being released commercially, after its initial showing as the first presentation of the New York Film Festival on its inauguration in 1963." Bosley Crowther (8/22/67).

TIME. "[In *The Exterminating Angel*,] Director Luis Bunuel, who once made a film with Salvador Dali showing an eyeball being shaved, again indulges his penchant for cinematic surrealism and elliptical dialogue. . . Throughout, Bunuel continues his career-long attack on church and state. One woman sneers, 'I think the lower classes are less sensitive to pain.' Another begs for a washable rubber madonna from Lourdes. When a window breaks, a guest scoffs, 'It's just a passing Jew.' A woman carries chicken feet and feathers in her purse. A man shaves his leg with an electric razor. A hand without an owner fingers its way across the room. . . Unfortunately, like his targets, Bunuel has aged poorly. His images no longer shock, his attacks, in the era of black humor, seem peculiarly tame and tepid. Manifestly, he intended *Angel* to fly on several levels. It could be a metaphor of proliferating fascism, as in Camus' *The Plague*. Or it could

be a restatement of the theme of *No Exit*, Sartre's trapped-in-a-room drama: hell is other people. Viewers are less likely to identify with either interpretation than with the film's initial dramatic problem: hardly a person lives who has not, at one time or another, had a hell of a time getting his guests to go home." (9/8/67).

VARIETY. "An unusual offbeater with the power to evoke discussion. It could be pegged a parable, a social satire or a dream film... Director Luis Bunuel, a Mexican of Spanish origin, copped the Grand Prix at Cannes for his *Viridiana* (1961) and may be in for a kudo on this one. In a strange manner, it exerts a hypnotic draw via perfection in mounting and acting. Buffs may have a greater feeling for the parade of symbols and ideas, but it has enough power to attract even the uninitiated... The symbols and ideas abound. The characters are stripped of any social facades. A bear and some sheep wander in during their seeming imprisonment. It probably can be explained but each spectator can find his own way in this fascinating filmic maze. It may be a razor sharp look at purgatory. The symbols may or may not have any true, clear meaning, but they do have shock value. Whatever, this is a film of depth, absorbing and offbeat with brilliant technique and observation. The acting is of a piece and well utilized by Bunuel while Gabriel Figueroa's crystal-like lensing is another asset." 'Mosk' (Cannes Film Festival-5/23/62).