

THE BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT GREAT FILMS WITH BRUCE JACKSON & DIANE CHRISTIAN

PRESENTED BY THE UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO AND THE MARKET ARCADE FILM AND ARTS CENTER

FEBRUARY 6, 2001 (III:4) THE EXTERMINATING ANGEL/EL ANGEL EXTERMINADOR

LUIS BUÑUEL (Luis Buñuel Portolés, 22 February 1900, Calanda, Spain—29 July 1983, Mexico City, Mexico, cirrhosis of the liver) became a controversial and internationally-known filmmaker with his first film, the 17-minute *Un Chien andalou* 1929 (*An Andalusian Dog*), which he made with Salvador Dalí. He wrote and directed 33 other films, most of them interesting, many of them considered masterpieces by critics and by fellow filmmakers. Some of them are : *Cet obscur objet du désir* 1977 (*That Obscure Object of Desire*), *Le Charme discret de la bourgeoisie* 1972 (*The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*), *Tristana* 1970, *La Voie lactée* 1969 (*The Milky Way*), *Belle de jour* 1967, *Simón del desierto* 1965 (*Simon of the Desert*), *Viridiana* 1961, *Nazarín* 1958, *Subida al cielo* 1952 (*Ascent to Heaven, Mexican Bus Ride*), *Los Olvidados* 1950 (*The Young and the Damned*), *Las Hurdes* 1932 (*Land Without Bread*), and *L'Âge d'or* 1930 (*Age of Gold*). His autobiography, *My Last Sigh* (Vintage, New York) was published the year after his death. Some critics say much of it is apocryphal, the screenwriter Jean-Claude Carrière (who collaborated with Buñuel on six scripts), claims **he** wrote it based on things Buñuel said. Whatever: it's a terrific book.

Leonard Maltin wrote this biographical note on Buñuel in his *Movie Encyclopedia* (1994):

“One of the screen's greatest artists, a director whose unerring instincts and assured grasp of cinematic technique enabled him to create some of film's most memorable images...After the sardonic documentary *Las Hurdes* in 1932, Buñuel took a 15-year layoff from directing. During a stay in the U.S. he worked for the Museum of Modern Art, preparing documentaries for export to foreign countries, and as a dubbing supervisor of Spanish films at Warners....

“His directing career began again in Mexico in the late 1940s; many of his films from this period, mostly assignment jobs, are undistinguished but bear interesting touches. Some, however, are genuinely excellent; the best remembered are *Los Olvidados* (1950), an unflinching look at Mexican poverty and juvenile delinquency, and *Nazarín* (1958), the story of a humble priest that was one of Buñuel's harshest critiques of Christianity. Buñuel's real renaissance as a filmmaker began in 1960, when he returned to his native Spain to direct *Viridiana* the deceptively simple tale of a novice pulled from the convent to tend to a family tragedy, unprepared for the corruption of the outside world she meets. The Franco regime in Spain banned it on release. Buñuel followed with one great work after another, attacking the most sacred of cows, particularly the Catholic church and the complacency of society—with remarkable energy and little mercy: *The Exterminating Angel* (1962), a savage assault on the bourgeois mentality, with guests trapped at a dinner party; *Diary of a Chambermaid* (1964), a costume picture updated to encompass the rise of fascism in the 1930s; the short religious parable *Simon of the Desert* (1965); a full flowering of surrealism in *Belle de jour* (1967), with Catherine Deneuve as a respectable wife who enjoys working at a whorehouse; *The Milky Way* (1969), a viciously funny, intricate trip through Catholic dogma; and *Tristana* (1970), with favorite Buñuel actor Fernando Rey as the guardian of Deneuve, and their-to put it mildly-odd relationship. When *Tristana* was nominated for a Best Foreign Language Film Oscar, the great anarchist, typically, commented, “Nothing would disgust me more, morally, than receiving an Oscar.” His next film, *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972), a marvelous,

surrealistic odyssey about a group of dinner guests unable to finish a meal, did win the Oscar. Buñuel's reaction is unknown. He followed it with the equally bizarre, if less well-received, *The Phantom of Liberty* (1974)... Buñuel also had a good deal of fun with erotic obsession; his last film, the hysterical *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977), chortles mightily at an old patrician's love for a frustratingly virginal beauty (played by two different actresses).”

EL ÁNGEL EXTERMINADOR
(1962, Mexico),
Production Companies: Films 59,
Producciones Gustavo Alatríste,
Uninci. **Runtime:** Mexico:95 / UK:89

Director Luis Buñuel
Writers Luis Alcoriza (story), José Bergamín (play *Los Naufragos*), Luis Buñuel
Producer Gustavo Alatríste
Original music Raúl Lavista,
Domenico Scarlatti
Cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa

Film editor Carlos Savage
Production designer Jesús Bracho
Costume designer Georgette
Special effects Juan Muñoz Ravelo

Silvia Pinal... Leticia "La Valkiria"
Jacqueline Andere... Alicia de Roc
José Baviera... Leandro
Augusto Benedico... The doctor
Luis Beristáin... Cristián
Antonio Bravo... Russell
Claudio Brook... Majordomo
César del Campo... The colonel

Rosa Elena Durgel... Sylvia
Lucy Gallardo... Lucía de Nobile
Enrique García Álvarez... Augusto Roc
Ofelia Guilmaín... Juana Avila
Nadia Haro Oliva... Ana Maynar
Tito Junco... Raúl
Xavier Loya... Francisco Avila
Xavier Masse... Eduardo
Ofelia Montesco... Beatriz
Patricia Morán... Rita
Patricia de Morelos... Blanca
Bertha Moss... Leonora
Enrique Rambal... Edmundo Nobile

GABRIEL FIGUEROA (24 April 1907, Mexico—27 April 1997, Mexico City, stroke following heart surgery) was Buñuel's cinematographer on seven films: *La Fièvre monte à El Pao* 1959 (*Fever Rises in El Pao, Republic of Sin*) *La Joven* 1960 (*Island of Shame, White Trash, The Young One*), *Nazarín*, *Los Olvidados*, *Simón del desierto*, *El Ángel exterminador*, and *Él*. He was cinematographer for 120 other films, most of them never seen this side of the border. Some that were: *Under the Volcano* 1984, *The Border* 1979, *The Children of Sanchez* 1978, *Two Mules for Sister Sara* 1969, *The Night of the Iguana* 1964, *The Pearl* 1947, and Sergei Eisenstein's *¡Che viva Mexico!* 1932.

In January 1928 Buñuel visited Dali and suggested they do a film together. The two talked about their dreams and decided to use them and other images in a film constructed by free association. Buñuel says they wrote the scenario in 8 days: "We identified with each other so much that there was no discussion. We put together the first images that came into our heads, and conversely, we systematically rejected everything that came to us from culture or education."

Production money came from his mother (he explained it was the equivalent in intention though not in amount of dowries she'd given two of his sisters). He promptly went to Paris and squandered half on soirées with friends, then realized he'd better get on with the film "because I was a responsible man and didn't want to cheat my mother." He shot the script in 10 days with a cast and crew of friends. Dali arrived for the final scenes only. The cast and crew didn't

SOME THINGS LUIS BUÑUEL SAID:

"I have not introduced a single symbol into the film, and those who hope for a thesis work from me, a work with a message, may keep on hoping! It is open to doubt whether *El angel exterminador* is capable of interpretation. Everyone has the right to interpret it as he wishes."

"Sex without religion is like cooking an egg without salt. Sin gives more chances to desire"

"To compare me with Goya is a nonsense. Critics speak of Goya because they don't know anything about Quevedo, Teresa of Avila, the picaresque literature, Galdòs, Valle Inclàn and others.... Today's culture is unfortunately inseparable from economic and military power. A ruling Nation can impose its culture and give a worldwide fame to a second-rate writer like Hemingway. Steinbeck is important due to American guns. Had Dos Passos and Faulkner been born in Paraguay or in Turkey, who'd read them?"

"While we're making the list of bêtes noires, I must state my hatred of pedantry and jargon. Sometimes I weep with laughter when I read certain articles in the *Cahiers du Cinéma*, for example. As the honorary president of the Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfica in Mexico City, I once went to visit the school and was introduced to several professors, including a young man in a suit and tie who blushed a good deal. When I asked him what he taught, he replied, "The semiology of the Clonic Image." I could have murdered him on the spot. By the way, when this kind of jargon (a typically Parisian phenomenon) works its way into the educational system, it wreaks absolute havoc in underdeveloped countries. It's the clearest sign, in my opinion, of cultural colonialism."

"The two basic sentiments of my childhood, which stayed with me well into adolescence, are those of a profound eroticism, at first sublimated in a great religious faith, and a permanent consciousness of death."

know what they were working on. The result was *Un Chien andalou*, the archetype of surrealist cinema. It begins with a man on a balcony slitting a young girl's eye (in reality the eye of a dead calf) as a cloud passes over the moon. "I filmed it," Buñuel said, "because I had seen it in a dream and because I knew it would disgust people." Dali's dream furnished ants pouring out of a hole in the man's palm. They aimed to shatter conventions of narrative and bridge the gap between the conscious and unconscious with a mix of eroticism and violence, to thereby confront and affront bourgeois morality.

FROM *WORLD FILM DIRECTORS*, ED, JOHN WAKEMAN (NEW YORK, 1987):

"In its evocation of dream states, its forceful expressions of sexuality and sexual frustration, and the resulting affront to bourgeois morality, *Un Chien andalou* exemplifies surrealist cinema. In fact, Buñuel's personal connection with the surrealists came only after the film was completed."

"When he presented *Exterminating Angel* in Paris, Buñuel prefaced the film with an explicit warning: "If the film you are going to see strikes you as enigmatic or incongruous, life is that way too. . . . Perhaps the best explanation for *Exterminating Angel* is that, 'reasonably, there isn't one.'" Like his Mexican producer, Gustavo Alatríste, who told him, "I didn't understand anything; it's marvelous," critics were quick to declare the stunningly inexplicable film a masterpiece.

"Morality—middle-class morality, that is—is for me immoral. One must fight it. It is a morality founded on our most unjust social institutions—religion, fatherland, family culture—everything that people call the pillars of society."

"The thought that continues guiding me today is the same that guided me at the age of twenty-five. It is an idea of Engels. The artist describes authentic social relations with the object of destroying the conventional ideals of the bourgeois world and compelling the public to doubt the perennial existence of the established order. That is the meaning of all my films: to say time and time again, in case someone forgets or believes otherwise, that we do not live in the best of all possible worlds. I don't know what more I can do."

"In the hands of a free spirit the cinema is a magnificent and dangerous weapon. It is the superlative medium through which to express the world of thought, feeling, and instinct. The creative handling of film images is such that, among all means of human expression, its way of functioning is most reminiscent of the work of the mind during sleep. A film is like an involuntary imitation of a dream. Brunius points out how the darkness that slowly settles over a movie theatre is equivalent to the act of closing the eyes. Then, on the screen, as with the human being, the nocturnal voyage into the unconscious begins. . . .The cinema seems to have been invented to express the life of the subconscious."

"Personally, I don't like film music. It seems to me that it is a false element, a sort of trick, except of course in certain cases."

"It seems to me that the art of cinema is inherent to the people of the North and that we Latins, laden with tradition, mysticism, culture, ecstasy—sensitive receivers of other forms of art—are incapable of assimilating that of motion pictures. Each of our attempts underscores the superiority of the people of the New World over us.

"American films in general are often criticized as trivial. But any one of them, even the most modest, always has a primitive ingenuity, a comprehensive photographic charm, an absolutely cinematic rhythm." (From a review of Abel Gance's *Napoléon*, 1927, Published in *Cahiers d'art*)

"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 infection of all kinds. The film is as beautiful as a bathroom, as vital as a Hispano-Suiza." (From a review of Buster Keaton's *College*, 1927)

And these, from a 1980 essay, "Pessimism":

"I have always been on the side of those who seek the truth, but I part company with them when they think they have found it. They often become fanatics, which I detest, or if not, then ideologues: I am not an intellectual and their speeches send me running. Like all speeches. For me, the best orator is the one who from the first phrase takes a pair of pistols from his pocket and fires on the audience."

"Cinema had always been seductive for me, because it is a complete means of expression, alternately realistic and oneiric, narrative, absurd, or poetic."

"Like them [Americans] I have wanted to eliminate from my films the beautiful images in which European cinema, with the exception of Visconti, has often lost itself."

"In my films I grant particular importance to the action and strive constantly to create surprises. The point of departure is often a very simple idea: people who can't manage to eat (*The discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*) or who are unable to leave a room (*The Exterminating Angel*) . . . I like surprises to provoke laughter. And I've made much use of objects, and of the fetishism they inspire, to create a comic effect. It's certainly true that fetishism bothers me in reality."

"I believe that my spirit is by nature destructive—and certainly of all of society. I have often returned to the subject of man struggling against a society that seeks to oppress and degrade him."

". . .The glut of information has also brought about a serious deterioration in human consciousness today. If the pope dies, if a chief of state is assassinated, television is there. What good does it do to be present everywhere? Today man can never be alone with himself, as he could in the Middle Ages.

"The result of all this is that anguish is absolute and confusion total."

". . .In the film I'm thinking about, I would have liked to shoot in the hall of the Reichstag a meeting of fifteen Nobel prize-winning scientists recommending that atomic bombs be placed at the bottom of all oil wells. Science would then cure us of that which feeds our madness. But I rather think that in the end we'll be borne off by the worst, because since *Un Chien andalou* the world has advanced toward the absurd."

"Filmmaking seems to me a transitory and threatened art. It is very closely bound up with technical developments. If in thirty or fifty years the screen no longer exists, if editing isn't necessary, cinema will have ceased to exist. It will have become something else. That's already almost the case when a film is shown on television: the smallness of the screen falsifies everything."

"I am the only one who hasn't changed. I remain Catholic and atheist, thank God."

FROM ANDRÉ BRETON, "LE MANIFESTE DU SURREALISME," 1924:

...We are still living under the reign of logic, but the logical processes of our time apply only to the solution of problems of secondary interest. The absolute rationalism which remains in fashion allows for the consideration of only those facts narrowly relevant to our experience. Logical conclusions, on the other hand, escape us.

...The mind of the dreaming man is fully satisfied with

whatever happens to it. The agonizing question of possibility does not arise. Kill, plunder more quickly, love as much as you wish. And if you die, are you not sure of being roused from the dead? Let yourself be led. Events will not tolerate deferment. You have no name. Everything is inestimably easy.

...Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of association heretofore neglected, in the omnipotence of the dream, and in the disinterested play of thought. It leads to the permanent destruction of all other

psychic mechanisms and to its substitution for them in the solution of the principal problems of life.

A SURREALIST MANIFESTO: THE DECLARATION OF JANUARY 27, 1925 (by Louis Aragon, Antonin Artaud, Jacques Baron, Joë Bousquet, J.-A. Boiffard, André Breton, Jean Carrive, René Crevel, Robert Desnos, Paul Éluard, Max Ernst, et al.)

With regard to a false interpretation of our enterprise, stupidly circulated among the public, We declare as follows to the entire braying literary, dramatic, philosophical, exegetical and even theological body of contemporary criticism:

1. We have nothing to do with literature; But we are quite capable, when necessary, of making use of it like anyone else,
2. Surrealism is not a new means or expression, or an easier one, nor even a metaphysic of poetry. It is a means of total liberation of the mind and of all that resembles it.
3. We are determined to make a Revolution.
4. We have joined the word surrealism to the word revolution solely to show the disinterested, detached, and even entirely desperate character of this revolution.
5. We make no claim to change the mores of mankind, but we intend to show the fragility of thought, and on what shifting foundations, what caverns we have built our trembling houses.
6. We hurl this formal warning to Society; Beware of your deviations and faux-pas, we shall not miss a single one.
7. At each turn of its thought, Society will find us waiting.
8. We are specialists in Revolt. There is no means of action which we are not capable, when necessary, of employing.
9. We say in particular to the Western world: surrealism exists. And what is this new ism that is fastened to us? Surrealism is not a poetic form. It

is a cry of the mind turning back on itself, and it is determined to break apart its fetters, even if it must be by material hammers!

A NOTE FROM THE IMDB BUÑUEL ENTRY:

“Bunuel liked to play tricks to his friends and, in Mexico, one of his favorite victims was the Spanish screenwriter Luis Alcoriza. During a hunting party Alcoriza saw an eaglet on a tree and knocked it down with the first shot but then he found a price tag on a paw: it was a stuffed bird put there by Bunuel. One evening the two were dining in a Mexico City restaurant and Alcoriza saw a beautiful and all alone woman that from her table shot to him passionate glances. Of course he began to apologize with his friend for leaving him but Bunuel rejected the excuses and seemed really angry. Alcoriza, a little embittered, eloped with the unknown belle and a little later, in a hotel room, saw these words written on her belly: ‘Happy night. Luis Bunuel’. The woman was a high-class prostitute engaged by the director.”

TALKING ABOUT MYTH AND NARRATIVE....

Diane is giving the 2001 Institute for Research and Education on Women & Gender's Distinguished Faculty Lecture. Her subject is "**GENDER MYTHS: SACRED STORIES OF SEX, DIFFERENCE & DOMINANCE.**" It takes place at 4:00 p.m., Thursday, February 22, in the Screening Room at UB's Center for the Arts. [//www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~bjackson/dcirewg.html](http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~bjackson/dcirewg.html).

The following Monday, February 26, at 7:30 p.m., also in the CFA Screening Room, Bruce will discuss ways our understanding and utilization of narratives change with time and context. His lecture is titled "**THE FATE OF STORIES**" and it is part of UB's College of Arts & Sciences Faculty Lecture series. See [//www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~bjackson/brucecas.html](http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~bjackson/brucecas.html).

Both lectures are free and open to the public.

Join us next week, Tuesday, February 13, for Eisenstein's IVAN THE TERRIBLE, parts I & II.

For more on Bunuel, visit [//members.nbc.com/scatt/bunuel.html](http://members.nbc.com/scatt/bunuel.html).

For frame enlargements from *Un chien andalou* visit [//www.tcf.ua.edu/Classes/Jbutler/T340/SurrealismUnChienAndalou1.htm](http://www.tcf.ua.edu/Classes/Jbutler/T340/SurrealismUnChienAndalou1.htm).

...email Bruce Jackson: bjackson@buffalo.edu...email Diane Christian: engdc@acsu.buffalo.edu...for the series schedule, links and updates: www.buffalofilmseminars.com...for the weekly email informational notes, send an email to either of us

...for cast and crew info on almost any film: <http://us.imdb.com/search.html>