The Criminal Life of

Luis Buñuel

Michael Wood.

para Don Luis, con
el afecto de siempre.
9 de diciembre, 1982.
—Michael.
(Son 3 capítulos —
desgraciadamente, muy
mal!)

I should like to thank the following for their unhesitating kindness and for all the hints and treasures provided by their company and their conversation: Janet and Luis Alcoriza, Julio Alejandro, Jeanne and Luis Buñuel, Gabriel Figueroa, Carlos Fuentes, Concha and Jose Ignacio Mantecon, Marie-Jose and Octavio Paz, Silvia Pinal, Alice Rahon, Mari-Carmen and Paco Ignacio Taibo, Carlos Velo. Unforgettable hours, as a character says in The Exterminating Angel.

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Contents

Bunuel's Films

There are good filmographies, through 1962, 1972 and 1977 respectively, in Michel Esteve, ed, Luis Bunuel, Lettres Modernes, Paris, 1963; Francisco Aranda, Luis Bunuel, translated and edited by David Robinson, Secker & Warburg, London, 1975; and Joan Mellen, ed, The World of Luis Bunuel, Oxford University Press, New York, 1978. The following list of films, with dates of first screening and with English and original titles, but without further credits, is meant to serve as a help to memory and as a rudimentary map. Where there are English titles already in use, I have given them; otherwise the translations are mine.

1929 Un Chien andalou/An Andalusian Dog

1930 L'Age d'Or/The Golden Age

1933 Las Hurdes/Land without Bread

1946 Gran Casino/Grand Casino

1949 El Gran Calavera/The Great Rake

1950 Los Olvidados/The Young and the Damned

1950 Susana

1951 La Hija del Engano/Daughter of Deceit

1951 Una Mujer sin Amor/A Woman without Love

1951 Subida al Cielo/Mexican Bus Ride

1952 El Bruto/The Brute

1952 Las Aventuras de Robinson Crusoe/Robinson Crusoe

1952 El/This Strange Passion

1953 Abismos de Pasion/Wuthering Heights

1953 La Ilusion viaja en Tranvia/Illusion takes a Tram

1954 El Rio y la Muerte/Death and the River

1955 Ensayo de un Crimen/The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz

1955 Cela s'appelle l'aurore/Call it Dawn (They)

1956 La Mort en ce jardin/Death in this Garden

1958 Nazarin

1959 La Fievre monte a El Pao/Fever in El Pao

1960 La Joven/The Young One

1961 Viridiana

1962 El Angel Exterminador/The Exterminating Angel

1963 Le Journal d'une femme de chambre/Diary of a Chambermaid

1965 Simon del Desierto/Simon of the Desert

1966 Belle de jour

1969 La Voie lactee/The Milky Way

1970 Tristana

1972 Le Charme discret de la bourgeôsie/The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie

1974 Le Fantome de la liberte/The Phantom of Liberty

1977 Cet obscur objet du desir/That Obscure Object of Desire

One: A Bundle of Mirrors

> Studio Vingt-Huit - high up a winding street of Montmartre, in the full blasphemy of a freezing Sunday; taxis arriving, friends greeting each other, an excitable afternoon audience...

The description is Cyril Connolly's, the occasion a showing of Luis Bunuel's Andalusian Dog. The audience seemed baffled at the end, and some of its members were angry; unprepared no doubt for what Connolly calls the "destructive reverence" of the film.

> With the impression of having witnessed some infinitely ancient horror, Saturn swallowing his sons, we made our way out into the cold of February 1929, that unique and dazzling cold.

The date can't be right, since the film opened, at another Paris cinema, in April 1929. It then moved to Studio Vingt-Huit for a run of nine months. Connolly's sense of the horror of the work, and of its romance ("Un Chien andalou brought out the grandeur of the conflict inherent in romantic love, the truth that the heart

is made to be broken, and after it has mended, to be broken again") leads him to ignore its farcical aspects, its echoes of Buster Keaton and its complementary truth that romantic love is as often as not a matter of violent grabs and dashes, a pantomime of lust wagging its human puppets. But his experience anticipates that of thousands of others. The first film we see by any major director usually makes a mark, but we don't always feel we have seen Saturn swallowing his sons.

The Executioner, a burly, dignified figure with sideburns and protruding eyes, a slight lurch in his walk, mounts the scaffold and tests his instruments, tightening the heavy screw of a garotte. His costume suggests the early nineteenth century. He takes off his hat and kneels to pray, and credits start to appear. The film is Spanish, called Lament for a Bandit; is directed by Carlos Saura, stars Francisco Rabal. The praying executioner, who takes no further part in the proceedings of this rather confused historical piece, is Luis Bunuel, aged 63.

We shouldn't ride this mild joke too hard, but many moviegoers will remember Bunuel's earliest appearance on film, at age 29, in An Andalusian Dog. He was sharpening a razor then, and about to slice a young woman's eye in two. He can be seen as a monk in Jean Epstein's Mauprat and in his own Phantom of Liberty; and in The Milky Way his voice delivers a ghastly sermon, taken

from Fray Luis de Granada, on the finality of hell: "Prayers are not heard there, promises are not admitted. Time for penitence is not given..." He also sits at a cafe table in Belle de jour, but this is, so to speak, his only innocent appearance in films. Elsewhere he is either butcher or priest - in the Mexican film There Are No Thieves in this Town he preaches on a theme from St Paul.

No very weighty significance attaches to these performances; ~~and we don't have to talk about the inscription of the author in his own (and other people's) texts.~~ Their playfulness is not less genuine because it will seem, to some tastes, slightly grim. And yet a wry, casual self-definition does hover here, a form of mask. The atheist plays the monk, and the surrealist cineast plays the torturer. The sharpening of the razor at the beginning of An Andalusian Dog is an assertion about the film, it will be an onslaught on our sight. Bunuel himself later described the movie as a "desperate and passionate call to murder." He does not sign his films with regular appearances, like Hitchcock. He signs his career with occasional jokes and metaphors, mockingly sketching out the range of his interests, caught between death and the consolations of a religion he does not believe in; between damage and the prospect of hell.

There is another edge to these images. Bunuel in conversation often refers to himself as a monk - "I'm a monk, I never go out" -

but he is not in such moments talking about religion. He is describing his asceticism and solitude, enlivened only by a few friends, a loyal and sprightly wife and, when his doctor permits it, plenty to drink. He is pointing to the fact that he lives so little in the world, has devoted himself so thoroughly to his films. And even this, he insists, the making of movies, this occupation which has consumed his long life, is all work and no joy. He will, if pressed, confess that he gets some pleasure out of writing films and editing them; merely dislikes everything that comes in between. But the force of the monkish image is clear. Fray Luis, in his way, is illuminating the manuscripts of the hard human condition. Asked when he would like to live, if he could be removed from the modern age he grumbles about, he promptly, if not entirely seriously, answers: the fourteenth century. Because there were fewer distractions then, he says; because men and women were not forced out of themselves into the noisy traffic of a time flooded with communications. His childhood in a Spanish province, he once wrote, "slipped by in an almost mediaeval atmosphere", and arriving in Madrid at the age of sixteen he felt like "a crusader who had suddenly found himself on Fifth Avenue".

Luis Bunuel is a person, but his name has become a sign. It evokes a set of specific meanings in the way that the name of Dickens conjures up Christmas and the name of Kafka suggests the darkening corridors of an endless quest. Julio Cortazar, for

example, in Hopscotch, uses Bunuel as an adjective, meaning given to playing games with time and space, skipping from Actium to the Anschluss; or as literally happens in Bunuel's Golden Age, hopping without warning from Majorca to an imagined Rome, and from the dawn of civilization to a troubled 1930. More frequently, and as a consequence of Bunuel's wider fame in the 1960s and 1970s, the name means cruelty, oddity, blasphemy, necrophilia and a spot of foot fetishism. Bunuel himself (the person) is aware of this, and amused by it. At lunch in our apartment one day Octavio Paz picked up a doll's shoe, set it on a tiny pedestal, and said, "A Bunuel film." Bunuel pretended to consider the matter, and then said, unblinking, "Without the shoe, it ~~would be perfect~~ is very exciting." His first script for Viridiana had the young novice falling in love with a dwarf, but he rejected the idea as "too Bunuel." It is also possible to feel, as Tom Milne suggests, that certain topics are almost too Bunuel even before Don Luis has got to work on them. Thus Octave Mirbeau's novel Diary of a Chambermaid has the slow and savage killing of a duck, and an elderly admirer of ladies' footwear - "Let me see them live, these little boots," the old chap murmurs, as the boots effectively come to life on the chambermaid's feet. At this point in time Mirbeau appears to be imitating Bunuel, and Bunuel, filming the novel, seems close to self-parody.

This gathering of recognizable interests into the orbit of one's name is not in itself the ~~Sign~~ proof of a major imagination, and it can become a burden, as when cardinal Spellman, in an ~~Archbishop Cardinal Archbishop~~ earlier avatar as Archbishop of New York, saw Bunuel as the Antichrist because he was

the author of The Golden Age; or as when critics and moviegoers fail to see Luis Buñuel's films because they have been befuddled by the sign Buñuel. The sign is only one of the man's more provocative masks, and it is a caricature of his movies, ignoring all their delicacy and complexity.

Even so, it is a sort of achievement, a legacy, as all names are which really name something. This is, in part, what an author is: a known name, a reputation which is provoked by the artist's practice but not always connected to any particularly close scrutiny of it. Fame is a form of misunderstanding, Borges says; but it is also an identity, however factitious. Distinct preoccupations cluster together in such signs, and their proximity reveals an otherwise muted kinship - notably, in the case of Buñuel, the intricate and ardent relationship between religion and sexuality, and the truth about convention proclaimed by every freak. Alfred Hitchcock knew what he was doing when, at a dinner in Hollywood in 1972, having scarcely spoken throughout the meal, he clapped an arm round Buñuel's shoulder and said admiringly, and without further comment, "Tristana. That wooden leg." He knew that being Buñuel, even a touch too Buñuel, is one of Luis Buñuel's pleasures. Living up to a sign is a way of not being imprisoned by it.

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~~Buñuel has a ferocious look in most photographs, a face that appears to be scowling even when it is not. There are exceptions -~~

~~On the contrary, their purpose is to keep us, courteously, at a distance. Bunuel does not seek congratulations, seems almost immune to the universal temptation to think rather better of ourselves and our doings than we should.~~

~~Biographically~~

He is nearly stone deaf, employs the use of a trumpet when his servants address him. He wears two pairs of thick spectacles and his body is quite feeble, but he hasn't lost all of his old fire.

A doctor appears and complains.

"You persist in disobeying me, you old rogue. Your servant tells me you demanded mutton yesterday."
"I have no prejudice against mutton," says Goya calmly.
"But I have," the physician tells him, "for your table. Good broth is what you need."
"Broth", scoffs the old man, "I wouldn't wash my paint brushes in it."

This is Bunuel's picture of Goya at 80, written in English in a treatment for a film that was never made. ~~(The text appears in the translation of Francisco Aranda's~~ Luis Bunuel~~)~~ Time has turned it into a self-portrait: a scene and a style foretold rather than invented. Bunuel's finished films in fact are also littered with portraits of the artist.

He gives his jealousy and mania for punctuality to the paranoid hero of This Strange Passion, his interest in guns to a landowner in Susana, his grumpy impatience to a whole dock of different characters, both male and female. Don Jaime in Viridiana is a version of

Don Luis in life, and so is Don Lope in Tristana. These are not direct or simple reflections. Bunuel is not to be identified with these people, he has only lent them pieces of himself. But they are genuine pieces, visible fragments, further forms of signature. He is, like Don Lope, an ironist in a world that has gone beyond irony, and the end he proposes for Don Lope, the militant atheist sipping chocolate amid a gaggle of priests, is an end he has often jokingly prophesied for himself. It is not that he will reconvert on his deathbed, as he promises. It is that the joking promise is a part of his personality - what you might do (but won't) is also an aspect of who you are. Bunuel's films are a second life in this sense, and this theme itself, the slender partition which separates act from recurring dream, often surfaces in them.

Don Jaime, for example, in Viridiana, does not violate his neice in her drugged sleep, but pretends he has in order to make her stay with him. Then he confesses that he offended her "only in thought" - only with thought, the Spanish literally says, giving a sharper sense of the mind as a form of weapon. Don Jaime here plainly stands for Bunuel, perpetrating horrors only on film, or with film. That only, as I shall suggest later, both saves Bunuel's work from a gloating and gratuitous sadism and at times makes its moral basis look rather shaky. "If you could be hanged for what you think of doing," he said to me one day, echoing Don Jaime, "I would have been hanged many times." In The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz he devotes a whole film to this subject, the story of a man who cannot commit the crimes he luridly dreams up, because his victims keep dying

before he gets to them. A man, for example, pursued by Archibaldo with a gleaming razor, a descendant of the one sharpened by Bunuel in An Andalusian Dog, ~~kk~~ falls down an open lift shaft, leaving her would-be assassin alone with his unwanted innocence.

Don Jaime and Don Lope are charming, pathetic, slightly ridiculous Spanish gentlemen. Bunuel is a charming Spanish gentleman, but the pathos and the ridicule are alternative visions, like the deathbed reconversion: what might have been but isn't. The resemblances are worth a little further inspection, though, because both characters are played by Fernando Rey, who thus becomes, in these roles, Bunuel's film twin: an elegant, lucid, doomed alter ego. Bunuel himself, as priest or butcher, shows us what he looks like in a pair of chosen, sardonic stances. Fernando Rey shows us what Bunuel, or part of Bunuel, feels like as a character: troubled by sexual demons and stranded by history. It seems paradoxical to say that there is more of Bunuel in Fernando Rey than there is of in Bunuel himself on the screen, but the mask does have a striking richness, and there may be no single, authentic face.

~~Luis Bunuel was born in the second month of this century in Calanda~~, ~~near Teruel, in Spain, and has lived in Mexico since 1946. His health has been fragile for some years now, and his spirits sink at times. He has trouble with his blood pressure, feels dizzy, claims his memory is going.~~ ~~The Phantom of Liberty~~

Bunuel has a ferocious look in most photographs, appears to be scowling even when he is not. There are exceptions -

a lopsided smile then lights up the irregular features - and there are comic snapshots: Lorca and Buñuel in a cardboard aeroplane, Buñuel in thick intellectual's wig and heavy Marcello Mastroianni glasses. But there is a brooding quality even to the eerie photograph, reproduced in Aranda's biography, of Buñuel the schoolboy "invested with the Image of the Immaculate Conception at the Congregacion Mariana." A stocky, solemn child in a sailor suit stares out of the frame with haunted, obstinate eyes. The eyes dominate all the pictures. A moustache comes and goes, glasses appear and disappear and change; a hearing aid is sometimes seen and sometimes not; hair falls away with the years, leaving only back and sides, and then wisps. Sometimes Buñuel wears a beret, and looks then like a Spanish peasant out for a quick look at the crops. But the eyes are constant: huge, vulnerable, overexposed. It can hardly be an accident that the owner of these eyes should have begun his career by filming the slashing of an eyeball, or that one of the most unforgettable moments in his later movies should focus on a staring, startled ostrich; or that one of the rare recent films Buñuel likes should be A Clockwork Orange, with its tiny metal claws holding open the eyes of Malcolm MacDowell, forcing him to confront screendh horrors.

I think of all Buñuel has allowed us to see over the years: and of the horse in Crime and Punishment, beaten across the eyes. The eyes: instrument and target, fragile in both cases. Buñuel's eyes are full of mirrored threats and questions, and his films record their passage.

But this is only one face, the dark, obsessed Buñuel; the public scowl, let's say, of a man who laughs a lot in private. He laughs, and this is the first corrective that an actual sight of ~~them~~ Buñuel offers to the accumulations of photographs and appearances in films. He is himself a sort of movie that cannot be evoked in a still, or a glimpse, or a stylised role. Mischievous, amiable grin, crooked teeth; the eyes more amused than haunted, kinder in movement than in stasis. He is never solemn, no conversations continues for long without a gag. Even his gripes have a note of gruff self-mockery. His manners are elaborate and impeccable. The monk as gentleman and jokester: Don Luis.

He is a man without vanity. I don't mean he is not touched by affection or admiration, or that he doesn't quite often prefer the elegance and purity of an intellectual pose to the tangle of the truth. He will insist, for example, that he doesn't like any of his films, never goes to the cinema, hates actors, doesn't care about film technique or the meaning of any of his movies. None of these propositions is entirely false, but all of them are simplifications, further masks. He doesn't like interviews, he tells a friend, because he doesn't have a personality. The friend, who on this occasion is also an interviewer, the Mexican writer Elena Poniatowska, gapes a little, unsure which leg is being pulled. Buñuel laughs. "I have a secret personality. Secret."

But the masks are not lures, are not worn to win our applause.

On the contrary, their purpose is to keep us, courteously, at a distance. Bunuel does not seek congratulations, seems almost immune to the universal temptation to think rather better of ourselves and our doings than we should.

Luis Bunuel was born in the second month of this century in Calanda, near Teruel, in Spain; and has lived in Mexico since 1945. His health has been fragile for some years now, and his spirits sink at times. He thinks glumly of the deaths of Sartre, Hitchcock, Carpentier. He has trouble with his blood pressure, feels dizzy, claims his memory is going. The Phantom of Liberty

has a very funny scene based on a personal experience - a cancer scare - that cannot have been amusing. "I should like to make a small incision," a doctor tells his patient after consulting some x-rays - the doctor turns out to be called Pasolini. "Simple radical curiosity. Whenever you want. When you have time." He pauses. "Will tomorrow be all right?"

I arrive at Bunuel's house on afternoon and ask him how he feels. "Old," he says. "Apart from that, how do you feel?" "Apart from that," he says, a faint grin beginning to show, "I feel terrible." There is no self-pity in him, only irritation at the defections of the body; no age really, except in this strictly physical sense. There is a song by Richie Havens which insists, with droning and undeniable logic, that younger men get older every day. It is a slow process in some cases, though, and there are older men who seem to stand still. Bunuel directed most of his major films after he was sixty, and "began", he says, with Nazarin, made when he was 58. This is an exaggeration, since he was at that time already the author of An Andalusian Dog, The Golden Age, The Young and the Damned and several very good Mexican films. But it is true that Bunuel came late into his own, was long in finding a sequence of films that were his films, the ones that had been waiting for him all his life: Viridiana, The Exterminating Angel, The Milky Way, Tristana, The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie. Maturity, with its hint of resignation and settled wisdom, is not the word for this discovery, and it seems vapid to call Bunuel's late films youthful. The point is that they are neither older nor younger than his first, ageless films. We cannot

chart this career in comfortable terms of growth, of a passage to serenity.

I met him, through Mexican friends, in the summer of 1978. I'm not sure what I expected or even what I wanted, but I know what I was afraid of. It seemed to me perfectly possible that we would have a brief, chilly chat, I would ask a handful of wet questions and find myself on the street again, armed only with the standard interview, or something less; and I would have no excuse for returning. Buñuel later gave me another reason for his dislike of interviews: "One says banal things, and always the same things."

In fact he treated me from the start as a new friend rather than an intruding writer, and I have two of his older friends, Carlos Fuentes and Santiago Genoves, to thank for that, as for much else. I realized too that I had misread the implications of the much-published difficulty of access to Buñuel. He is hard to get to, but that is not because a monster lurks at the heart of the labyrinth, it is because the monster is something of a lamb. His friends are chary of asking him to do things because they know he will say yes, not because they think he will say no.

I don't want to give the impression of a sweet personality. The darkness and ferocity of the photographs is seriously qualified, but not cancelled, by the live person. A certain gloom and a certain

severity persist. Speaking to me one day of his concern for his sons, he says, "Of course, I'm scarcely the paternal type." He means he loves them but has never been able to play the Hollywood father, Spencer Tracy in a genial mood. He says no to all kinds of offers and requests, including, last year, an honorary doctorate from Harvard and a new film for which he had already mapped out a production schedule.

But he doesn't often say no to his friends, and I do want to suggest that there is an unchanging gaiety of mind in him which lends wit and lightness to the saddest, sternest remarks. He takes himself seriously, as I once wrote of Stendhal, but hates to be seen doing it; doesn't like the thought of such seriousness. I take this not as an evasion or a besetting frivolity but as a form of discipline - the kind of discipline that great comics show when they refuse to bend their jokes towards mellow sentiment or an easy air of significance.

Conversation flows. I convert my ordinary mumble into a carefully articulated Spanish shout, and Buñuel seems to understand most of what I say, although there are funny gaps and lulls. Like many deaf people he often pretends to have caught a meaning he has missed, and his guesses then lead off on wild tangents. He is touched, slightly surprised by the signs of my ~~attention to~~ courting of his films, by the details I remember and mention; surprised, I think, in spite of all the public attention he has received, that anyone should like these films, which he sees either as humdrum jobs of work or rather private studies in what he once called human geography. He doesn't think

about them when they are done, although his critical judgement of them seems to me impeccable - that is, closely corresponds to my own.

The films he made in Mexico between 1946 and 1960 really are pretty bad for the most part, and the exceptions he will single out, if pushed a little, if made to retreat from his first claim that none of them is any good, are also the ones I choose: The Young and the Damned, This Strange Passion, The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz, Nazarin. We disagree about The Young One, a very stilted and simplified movie about race relations in the American South, which Bunuel likes better than I do; and about Susana and Wuthering Heights, which I like better than he does. We spoke once about A Woman without Love, a truly terrible version of Maupassant's Pierre et Jean. "What happened there?" I asked. Bunuel shrugged. "Nothing occurred to me", or to translate a little more colloquially, "I couldn't think of anything to do with it."

In 1978 I saw Bunuel a few times with friends; stopped by for drinks, went to lunch. Then at his thoughtful suggestion we arrived at a working arrangement. I would call him when I felt I wanted to talk to him, and we would fix an hour the same day or the next day. The hour, as it turned out, was invariably five O'clock in the afternoon. Quite often I would have seen a Bunuel movie ~~earlier in the day~~ in the morning at the Mexican Cineteca, and there was a peculiar exhilaration is travelling so (relatively) quickly down the streets of a real city from the work to its maker. In this book all comments by Bunuel, and all information about

him, which are not otherwise attributed, come from these conversations. I left Mexico at the end of 1978, but returned in 1980 and stayed for more than a year. At some point I cut my conversations with Bunuel loose from the preparation of this book, allowed them to lapse into pure pleasure. It was a relief not to be treating good talk as mere material.

Needless to say, quite apart from explicit quotations and paraphrase, my sense of the films is closely caught up with my sense of the man - although not, I think, seriously changed by my knowing him, only filled out, sharpened, corrected in detail. I now understand better, for example, the nature of what in the next chapter I call Bunuel's coldness, the purity of his attention to human behaviour, as distinct from an endorsement of any particular pieces of it. I see more clearly too that Surrealism has a curious double edge, can be insinuated into a world that needs waking up, but can be held against a world that cherishes its own incoherence too dearly. A waiter in The Exterminating Angel bears an elaborate dish into a dining room and falls on his face, spraying liver and honey and sauce in all directions. The guests are surprised; some are amused, some not. We learn that the waiter's fall was a prank planned by the hostess, who now steps out to cancel a pair of further projected schemes involving a brown bear and a small flock of sheep. There is, in other words, no ambiguity about this moment, as I once thought there was, no sense of the waiter's fall being either planned or not planned, recuperable or not, depending on the level of our anxiety, by the arts of interpretation. It is not Bunuel who is the Surrealist

here, but social life. The incident is based on a story told Bunuel by Iris Barry, and the impulse in the film is as naturalistic and sociological as one could wish, seeks simply to capture the not so discreet and less than charming wit of a silly bourgeoisie. There are plenty of moments in Bunuel's films which flirt with and baffle interpretation - the sack carted about by Fernando Rey in That Obscure Object of Desire is an instance, as are the uncanny repetitions of shots and talk in The Exterminating Angel itself. But the waiter's pratfall is not one of them.

Bunuel's house is a modest, comfortable affair with a walled garden, situated in what used to be a quiet part of Mexico City. It is still in a cul-de-sac, but the street is full of parked cars, and surrounded by the howl and sprawl of fifteen million people getting in each other's way. The small sitting-room where we chat has solid, inexpensive Mexican furniture and a large map of the Paris Metro on the wall. It also has a portrait of Bunuel by Dali, which Bunuel has been thinking of selling. In America during the Second World War, Dali denounced Bunuel as a Communist - Bunuel says he was never a member of the Party - and a meeting in New York was arranged, at which Bunuel planned to bash Dali's face in - he had after all, as a student, been a champion boxer. He didn't, though, and the two men talked. "Why did you do it?" "I am building a pedestal for myself." The former friends ended up drinking champagne, but Bunuel has not spoken to Dali since. On the other hand he does not speak against him; remains faithful to the figure Dali himself has long left

behind. He is a genius, Bunuel will say, we were very close at one time.

A cat wanders into this room occasionally. Bunuel's wife will return from walking their dog Tristana, a short-legged nondescript-looking terrier. "M Bunuel is terrible," Jean Vigo once wrote, but M Bunuel cannot get this dog to stop climbing on the sofa. Mme Bunuel - Jeanne - is a strong-minded, still beautiful Frenchwoman some 8 years younger than he is. If she looks athletic it is because she is athletic: she won a bronze medal at the 1924 Olympics. The shout she has developed for domestic communications has a charm of its own, a French accent floating on the Spanish words. She is irreverent, open, quick, kind, engaging, enduring. Bunuel is a difficult patient when he is ill, and I imagine he can at times be impossible even when he is healthy. It would be impertinent to poke into this marraige, but it is hard to think of Bunuel without Jeanne; easyk to see how she can commandk his watchful fidelity. They met in Paris in 1925 and were married in 1933.

A meal in this house, for anyone who is thinking of Bunuel's films, has a slightly specular effect. The atmosphere is jolly, jokes fly. One particular occasion falls on our wedding anniversary and Bunuel, learning this, takes off to the cellar to fetch some champagne. Lunch is a splendid paella. He tells the story of an encounter with Henry Miller who wondered about the title of

An Andalusian Dog. Not what it meant, but why not An Andalusian Bitch? Someone asks whether that is the question most often put to Bunuel: about the significance of that first title. No, he says, the most frequent question concerns the lacquered box brought along by the brothel's Japanese client in Belle de Jour, and which gives out an odd whirring sound, as of insects celebrating or winding up. Bunuel recalls a dinner at which a distinguished person arriving slightly late sat down breathlessly and without delay for politeness or approach work said, "Now tell us, Bunuel, what was in that box in Belle de Jour?" Someone now asks, "And did you tell him." Bunuel grins. "How could I? I don't know."

But the films which for me are secretly reflected in this reel are not Belle de Jour and An Andalusian Dog, but two other Bunuel works, closer to home. Shall we perhaps mysteriously be unable to leave, as happens with the guests in The Exterminating Angel, stranded after dinner in a well-to-do house, shipwrecked on a socialk island? Will lunch be interrupted by the army or various dream agencies, as occurs in The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie? I mention these questions not because I am particularly taken with their bright whimsy, but because I think there is more than whimsy to them. Bunuel has taught us to see the social world in this way: as fragile and farcical and yet oddly, aggravatingly permanent. There is an insight here which is something like the reverse of the premise of Conrad and much Anglo-Saxon literary criticism. Manners are not flimsy structures flung over a pit of savagery and darkness, they are just manners, habits, an inheritance. Bunuel has them and likes others to have them, but this is a matter of

taste, not of civilisation as opposed to something else. Beasts have manners too, and the sub-title of J-H Fabre's Memories of an Entomologist is "studies of the instincts and manners of insects" - rather as thex sub-title of Mme Bovary promises a portrait of "provincial manners." This vision makes manners in the broadest sense seem both crazier and sturdier than we usually think they are, as arbitrary as Saussurêês signs and as resistant tox change as the bourgeôisie itself. Another,related thought: eating paella here, sipping champage,we are the bourgeoisie, whatever our politics or postures. Later that day I found myself formulating an axiom: the often unbearable world of Bunuel's films is articulated from wthin, depicted by a resident. Bunuel neither attacks nor accepts society, he lives in it - or slightly to the side of it. But more importantly, it lives in him, and his films display its antics with all the complex, compromised intimacy which marks the worlds of Cau or Balzac.

I met in Mexico a remarkable gentleman, Jose Ignacio Kantecon, who has known Bunuel since he was 5, and who was at school with him - at a Jesuit college in Saragossa which by all accounts was barely distinguishavle from the parallel place attended by James Joyce in Dublin some 14 years earlier. Indeed A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, with its meditations on death, judgement and hell and its sticky climate of sexual transgression, is a perfect introduction into one of Bunuel's worlds.

Stephen Dedalus feels "the leprous company of his sins" about him and

is taught that eternity for the damned is "an eternity of pain."

> He felt the deathchill touch the extremities and creep onward towards the heart, the film of death veiling the eyes, the bright centres of the brain extinguished one by one like lamps, the last sweat oozing upon the skin...

"The two basic sentiments of my childhood," Bunuel wrote in English in 1939, "are those of a profound eroticism, at first sublimated in a great religious faith, and a permanent consciousness of death. My eight years as a student with the Jesuit fathers only increased these sentiments instead of diminishing them." Some 42 years later Bunuel spoke to me of the sexual instinct with a weary, bemused disgust. It makes us slaves, he said.

And yet Bunuel is grateful to the Jesuits, and so is his friend Mantecon. They were buena gente, good people, as a character says of them in The Exterminating Angel. They taught order and discipline, and it is easier to lapse from Catholicism, as both Bunuel and Mantecon have done, than from the habits of mind nurtured in such schools. An excellent education in error is a wonderful things, and I shall return to Bunuel's religion in a later chapter.

Manuel Alcala, whose Cine e Ideologia has a good chapter on Bunuel's schooldays, is a Jesuit whose position is precisely the opposite of mine. For him Bunuel's education was too strict and too scary, and so he is not able to recognize thex changes in the church or the developments of the new theology. Alcala sees very well how much religious trouble there is in Bunuel's films, how far his atheism is from being comfortable; doesn't see that serious atheism has nothing to

do with theology or the church, only with man's scandalous invention of God.

When Bunuel threatens to call for a priest and confess on his deathbed, he is thinking of Mantecon. I shall be in hell, Bunuel says, because that's where you go when you take the last sacraments as a gag, and I shall be laughing at the idea of Mantecon x irritably wondering how I could relapse in this way. The gag is more delicate than it looks, since it mocks solemn and fervid atheism as well as orthodox religion, and the frame of mind it represents is well pictured in a Spanish joke that was going the rounds a year or two ago. An atheist and a believer are discussing miracles, and the atheist says, "You can't believe all that stuff about faith moving mountains, and so on." "Oh yes," the believer says. "I mean, for example, "the atheist continues, "could you get up and fly around this room, just by faith?" "Of course," the believer says, and flies around the room gracefully, about five feet off the floor. The atheist, enraged, says, "Goddamn fanatic!"

Another glimpse: Bunuel as godfather to the daughter of the actress Silvia Pinal. He merely grunts in response to a series of ritual questions concerning his faith, but finally mumbles "I believe" in answer to a last, highly generalized injunction. It is not that Bunuel is not an atheist. He is suspicious of the pose, tired of hearing repetitions of his own remark, "Thank God I'm still an atheist." He once said that the only thing wrong with a friend's otherwise admirable series of articles was their "parti-pris against Marxism."

He added, "a parti-pris is always wrong." That is a parti-pris too, I suppose, but one could hardly wish for an ampler one.

But it was not Bunuel's religion or early days that Mantecon principally evoked for me. What I/took from the conversation was chiefly a sense of other pieces of Bunuel's mind and life. Mantecon, lawyer, historian, Communist, Commander of a Republican Army during the Civil War, friend of Pedro Salinas, Jorge Guillen, Luis Cernuda, Emilio Prados and a whole dispersed generation of poets and artists, represents Spain, their Spain, that broken and lost country, in a way that Bunuel does not. It's not that Bunuel is less Spanish; merely that less history clings to him. Even so, this Spain is extremely important for Bunuel, if only because it is the world he lost.

Madrid in the 1920s, where Bunuel was pursuing his studies at the Residencia de Estudiantes, was the heart of a tremendous explosion of culture and learning - so tremendous, I was told by Carlos Velo, another gifted, exiled Spaniard and the producer of Nazarin, that only violence could end it. Spain had to enter the twentieth century in a hurry, Velo suggests, or smash every promise of change and open openness. A great deal more could be said about this Spain, but it would require another book.

Mantecon spoke of Galdos, the author of the novels behind Nazarin and Tristana, and one of Bunuel's favourite writers. He was not a fashionable figure in the 1920s and 1930s, but he had invented Madrid in the sense that Balzac had invented Paris, and Bunuel would say to

friends, "Let's take a walk in one of Galdo's neighbourhoods", as one might step out in the direction of Swann's way.

We were interested in literature and philosophy, Mantecon said, and Buñuel has remarked elsewhere that he was reading Nietzsche and the Russian novelistsx at that time. But our heroes, Mantecon continued, were scientists. Not Ortega y Gasset or Unamuno, but Bolivar the great biologist. Science was a school and a model; not necessarily a career, but a principle. Buñuel and his friends found in science the sort of hard edge Ezra Pound looked for in poetry, a language of "clarity and vigour", "austere, direct, free from emotional slither." Buñuel's continuing interest in entomology, prolonged from his student days, is neither a hobby nor a whim, but a form of fidelity to this ideal - although his real entomology, of course, is found in his films. We don't have to believe in the neutrality or the supposed hardness of science in order to see what this allegiance means, and how far it is from a dedication to the life of a man of letters, or an intellectual, or even an artist, in several of the usual senses of those words.

Buñuel came to films not late but slowly - an odd fact when one thinks of the exclusiveness his vocation assumed once he had found it. He played the vkolin, considered a career as a composer;

studied agriculturalm engineering, biology and history, in the last of which he finally took a degree. In 1923 his father died, and a year later Bunuel took off for Paris, with the not very settled plan of getting a job in an international organization and becoming a man about the world. His father, he says, would never have let him go.

He was invited to direct Manuel de Falla's chamber opera, Master Pedro's Altarpiece, in Amsterdam in 1926, with Mengelberg conducting the Concertgebouw Orchestra. The show mixed puppets and human figures and was a great success - even Bunuel concedes that it was "not catastrophic." Soon after this Bunuel saw Fritz Lang's film Destiny in Paris and understood for the first time what the cinema could be - the same film, as Carlos Fuentes reminded me, provoked much the same thoughts in the young Alfred Hitchcock, so that Lang is a kind of godfather to both. Bunuel now concentrated on film and became a pupil of Jean Epstein. He was assistant director on Epstein's Mauprat (1927) and The Fall of the House of Usher (1928) and on a Josephine Baker movie called The Siren of the Tropics (1927). He wrote film criticism - of Stroheim, Lang, Dreyer, Gance, Buster Keaton - and returned to Madrid occasionally to see friends and stir up film clubs. Meanwhile he and Dali had begun to write An Andalusian Dog, an attempt not to put dreams on film but to use dreams as a film source. Bunuel's mother offered a little money and the film was made, and resulted, after some initial hesitation on the part of Andre Breton and his friends, in the admission of Dali and Bunuel to the Surrealist

group. Bunuel's next film, The Golden Age, funded by the Vicomte de Noailles, was a major Surrealist occasion, complete with solemn manifesto and the wrecking of the cinema by the movements enemies. It was described on a programme as a film parlant surrealiste, a surrealist talkie, but it was also a film which spoke surrealist, as one speaks French or Spanish or jabberwocky, and members of the Anti-Semitic League and the League of Patriots didn't like its style. They bombarded the screen, smashed some furniture and broke up an exhibitionm of Surrealist paintings in the foyer. Showings of the film were then suspended by the police because it "caused disorder." Bunuel had achieved the "consecration of cat-calls" which Aragon had earlier wished for the cinema.

In 1930 Bunuel made a trip to Hollywood, met Eisenstein and Chaplin, and observed some shooting at the Metro Studios. He then returned to Spain and with some money a friend had won in a lottery made one of the most remarkable of all his films, Land without Bread, a dark documentary about a barren and backward community not a hundred miles from Salamanca. This film was banned in the Republic even before it was banned by Franco. It was also the last film Bunuel was to direct until he found a home in Mexico 14 years later, and taken together these first three works give us his picture of civilisation as something like the torture of Tantalus, an arrangement which separates us, by a few inches or a few miles but irremediably, from everything we need.

Bunuel did some dubbing for Warner Brothers in Madrid, and

produced four comedies for a Spanish company called Filmofono. There was talk of his directing a version of Lafcadio Adventures, financed by the Soviet Union in appreciation of Gide's sympathy for Russian Communism, but the project fell through. Bunuel now is rather relieved at the thought of not having been in Moscow in 1935. Franco's rebellion then plunged Spain into nightmare and Bunuel returned to Paris, where he assembled some already shot footage into a compilation called Spain 1937. He was in America when the Civil War ended, and chose to stay on. He worked at the Museum of Modern Art for two years, revising documentaries for South American distribution, although the only film he talks about much is a montage of Riefenstahl's Triumph of the Will and Hans Bertram's Baptism of Fire. The idea was to edit this daunting Nazi material into a travesty of its own gesticulating brutality, and Bunuel tells ofshowing the result to Chaplin and Rene Clair. Both Chaplin, who has just completed The Great Dictator, thought Bunuel's concoction was wonderfully funny, a perfect onslaught through ridicule. Clair disagreed, felt there was no way of editing the persistent power out of those images. Others took Clair's view and the film has never been shown.

It was at this point that Dali accused Bunuel of being a Communist. The Motion Picture Herald got into the act, and Bunuel resigned his post at the Museum rather than wait to be fired. It was at the time of Mers-el-Kebir, he recalls, there were other things going on in the world. Francisco Aranda suggest that 40 people left the

Museum in that year "on account of their political beliefs". Bunuel went to Hollywood and again did some dubbing for Warners. He directed a memorable sequence for Robert Florey's The Beast with Five Fingers, in which a pianist's severed hand appears to give night-time recitals - it plays the Bach Chaconne beautifully - and to strangle a hallucinating Peter Lorre. "The hand," Lorre whimpers in his best, distraught Gothic style, "the horrible hand." The horrible hand, which is already a reminiscence of a similar trophy in An Andalusian Dog, makes a come back in The Exterminating Angel, but it looks alive, a plausible, gruesome, scuttling creature, only in The Beast with Five Fingers.

Bunuel moved to Mexico in 1945; October 31, as Jeanne remembers with precision. A plan for filming Lorca's The House of Bernarda Alba fell through came to nothing, but possibilities of work began to glimmer, and despite the fact that having made one movie he was unemployed for three years Bunuel decided to settle in Mexico. He and Jeanne were naturalized in 1948. Of their two sons Juan Luis is French by birth and Rafael is American. From this moment, as Aranda nicely says, "Bunuel's biography is very much that of his films."

Hard years followed, but Bunuel found a friend in the producer Oscar Danzigers, and began to turn out all kinds of movies at tremendous speed, completing shooting in anything from 18 to 35 days. The Young and the Damned is the only thoroughly personal film of this period, although as I have suggested there are other lights in the darkness. In 1955 Bunuel was invited tom make a film in France, They Call it Dawn, and began to emerge from the obscurity of an exile that was almost a concealment - that was a concealment

in a sense I shall shortly indicate. Two Franco-Mexican and one Mexican-American productions were shot in Mexico - Death in this Garden, Fever in El Paso, The Young One - and Bunuel made Nazarin, which has its faults but effectively put an end to the long spottiness of Bunuel's career. Since 1960 he has shot five films in France, two in Spain, two in Mexico, and one, his last, in France and Spain. Until recently he spent part of each winter in Paris and Madrid, returning to Mexico for the rest of the year. Now he scarcely travels. Friends write and visit, tempt him out of his solitude. Michel Piccoli sends news, Fernando Rey drops in. Serge Silberman tries to get him to make another movie. Jean-Claude Carriere, co-author of six out of Bunuel's last eight films, is putting together an informal biography based on taped conversations. A collection of Bunuels early writings is due to appear in Spain this autumn.

What is Bunuel's Mexico, this place where he has now lived for thirty-five years? He is himself not really a Mexican, in spite of ~~it~~ his passport - partly, I think, because one cannot become a Mexican. ~~Spanish children born in Mexico speak with a Spanish accent - one cannot begin to imagine the same phenomenon with regard to English children in America.~~ Mexico is a shy, secret country, and even the eloquent diagnoses of its quirks and ills by gifted natives like Octavio Paz and Carlos Fuentes tend to deepen the mystery rather than abolish it. For this reason it is essential to avoid all bland

conclusions on the subject. One can know Mexico, learn the rules of living there, and many people, foreigners and natives, develop extraordinary skills at the game. Mexican politics make Machiavelli look like an anxious graduate student. But this is practical knowledge, experience. Discursive understanding is another matter, and claims to possess it always ring hollow. No Tocqueville has yetx arrived, or been born, in Mexico.

But it doesn't help much to say simply that Bunuel is Spanish. He is - as Spanish as Goya or Quevedo, to mekexx what have become the obligatory references. But nationality is a capacious concept; a useful reminder at times, but not much of an analytical instrument; and Bunuel's Spanishness is profound xxx but also, as I have suggested, discreet and tempered with a rootlessness which is less an accident of his history than a feature of his mind. At 24 he went to Paris to become a playboy and became a monk instead. But he has remained a wanderer, a flaneur in a sense related to that proposed by Walter Benjamin. A largely sedentary wanderer, the oddness of the phrase hinting at the strangeness of the case. He doesn't literally walk the streets - although he did in the years before he made The Young and the Damned - he stays at home and walks the world. The curious thing about Bunuel's recent films is not only that they do not appear tok have been made by an old man, they do not seem to belong to a man who lives in a cul-de-sac and rarely goes out. They are topical films, full of drugs and terrorism and up-to-date chatter.

But they are also curiously placeless. They are somewhere, of course, an individual spot has posed for the camera in France, or Spain, or Mexico. But it doesn't really matter much where that somewhere is, or what language is being ~~xpxxxxx~~ spoken. The films slip easily into other times and countries, as if the fazed fixity of history and geography had been grossly exaggerated. I mentioned earlier that this has been one of the meanings of the word Bunuel since The Golden Age.

Everything is specific in these movies, almost nothing is local. I don't have a word for this peculiar quality, but I want to suggest that Bunuel's Mexico is very much a part of it. These places which are not places are Mexico, or at least they are what Bunuel found there, having prophesied their possibility in his first films. This sense of things is clearest, perhaps, in The Young and the Damned.

The film opens with stock shots of New York, London and Paris, familiar, famous sights, Big Bens, New York Bay, the Eiffel Tower, the tourist's world, but also signs of the city. We then see two or three particularly anonymous-looking bits of Mexico City. The soundtrack burbles on for a moment about the ~~xxxxxx~~ hidden miseries of urban life, and the whole sequence would be terribly banal, were it not for the drabness of these Mexican shots, and for what Bunuel is about to show us about the place where he lives.

It is a place of shanties and hotels, rickety structures that seem to be waiting for the wolf to blow them down; of deserted lots, empty patches of dust and grass; and of new constructions going up, large,

ambitious, modern buildings - like Godard's Paris, Bunuel's Mexico is permanently being built. It is the waste land, in a sense far less figurative than Eliot's, and this film, which seems a little dated in other ways (slow motion for dream sequences, significant music as excessively apprppriate moments, "artistic" patterns of imagery) is extraordinarily contemporary in this respect. The ~~fx~~ half-finished buildings seen in The Young and the Damned are finished now; they are even old. But their descendants are still going up everywhere, scaffolding and reinforced concrete promising newer, better things. New waste lots spring up as the result of clearances and demolitions; and the shanties and hovels migrate from zone to zone, but remain what they always were. It is still possible, any day in Mexico City, to turn a corner, to step off a fashionable street, and find yourself in the setting of The Young and the Damned, complete with ragged children playing ancient games. The fact that this experience is available in other cities too - is available in all large cities, perhaps, if not quite as easily as in Mexico - underscores the point, started by the nondescript shots I mentioned a moment ago.

This is the Mexico City which appears more often than any other in Bunuel's work - more often than any other place at all, perhaps. Dull, spacious, impersonal modern streets. [Neither shanty nor high-rise nor ~~waste land~~ desert, but the city which flourishes among them.] The town is flattened out, emptied of its variety, of its parks and fountains; converted into a permanent suburb on film. These streets appear to be nowhere, nameless, faceless. But they appear to be nowhere not

because they could be anywhere but because they are everywhere. Their very facelessness reflects their ubiquity, they are the streets of the century.

Mexico, then, gave Buñuel a home when he needed one; reunited him with friends; returned him to his language; and offered him more of those stark, dry landscapes which are so much a part of his visual kingdom. The rocks of Majorca modulate into Mexican boulders; the aridity of Land without Bread stalks the villages of Nazarin. But above all, perhaps, Mexico allowed Buñuel to practice being no one, like Odysseus; nourished his secret personality and his ability to be everywhere, like those nameless streets. Mexico represents neither a displaced Spain nor a cosy cosmopolitanism. It is the perfect, strenuous, uninvaded exile which opens out on to nothing less than the infinite particulars of the world.

My own acquaintance with Buñuel's films began one damp autumn evening in Cambridge, England. I had seen a good deal of Bergman and Fellini by then, had followed the beginnings of the French New Wave and had slept through a reasonable number of classics of cinema history, but I had never seen anything like Viridiana. The film has a number of startling and now famous images - a small

crucifix opens to become a menacing knife, a company of riotous beggars compose themselves into a parody of Leonardo's Last Supper, a snatch of the Hallelujah Chorus blaring out in the soundtrack - and a ferocious implied argument about charity. All charity which is less than infinite leaves the world unchanged, and what charity is not less than infinite? Yet the most memorable feature of Viridiana was not its imagery or its argument but the harsh, almost reckless intelligence behind it, its manifest intention to disturb. I don't mean the work was out to provoke a literal disturbance, although Bunuel's films have set off a number of those. Connolly recounts the beginnings of one; I have mentioned the manifestations surrounding The Golden Age; Viridiana itself has been banned all over the place, and has only recently been screened in Spain. I mean the film chiefly wants to trouble us, wants to send us home rattled and uncomfortable in a way that even the darkest of dramas and documentaries don't. We are not to be concerned or saddened; we are to feel irritated and helpless.

Bunuel himself has said more than once that his films are designed to show us that we don't live in the best of worlds. They certainly do that, but the formulation is not strong enough, or flexible enough. It suggests for one thing that those of us who know we don't live in the best of worlds have nothing to learn from Bunuel, which is not true. It also implies that those who think we do live in such a world can be persuaded to think otherwise by a movie, which is unlikely.

Bunuel's films display a world which must be changed, which is intolerable. But they offer no indication of how this world can be changed, indeed they usually intimate that it can't. They have all the horror Connolly describes and all the wit he misses, and they face us, finally, with a flat and maddening contradiction, a social and historical version of Beckett's compulsive impossibility. "I can't go on, "Ill go on," Beckett's unnamable character says. And Bunuel's films, insofar as they say anything at all, seem to mutter, "This can't go on, how could it end?"

A few months after seeing Viridiana for the first time I was in Spain and met a charming man, a doctor, who claimed to know Bunuel intimately, and to have helped him recruit the beggars for that film. I can't remember whether I believed him or not. Probably I did. Bunuel for me was as distant as Cervantes or Saint Theresa, and I didnt even know where he lived. Then I forgot about the encounter, except for thinking kindly of the doctor and Madrid whenever I saw Viridiana again, or when my thoughts turned to Spain. And with time I certainly ceased to believe in the story. All this weary sophistication vanished when I saw The Phantom of Liberty. Right at the beginning of the film a group of Spanish prisoners is led out to be shot by Napoleon's soldiers. They include Bunuel himself as a monk, Serge Silberman, Bunuel's producer, and the writer Jose Bergamin, an old friend of Bunuel's. They also include, handsome, amiable, and to me uncannily familiar, my old acquaintance the doctor, Bunuel's pal Jose-Luis Barros. It took me a while to place the recognized

face, and of course it was much later before I filled in the rest of the puzzle. Durmel was delighted when I told him the story - he loves terrible coincidences - and thought it would have been even better if Barros and I were to turn out to be long-lost brothers. I hang on to that flickering moment, though, because when I saw the film and found the face I realised I had caught a piece of lost time: not only Madrid and Dr Barrosa and an earlier self, but Viridiana as it felt the first time round: blasphemous, brilliant, ragged, indifferent to the preoccupations of unity and coherence which most aesthetics demand: Saturn swallowing a daughter.

This is not quite the book I had in mind. I began to write about Durmel because I was drawn to certain aspects of his work, and because certain aspects of his career - his long silence, his longer exile - posed persistent questions. But I was also looking for a particular case, a set of examples against which to test some general queries about the cinema: about the authorship of films, about art and industry, about the ways in which films are constructed and reconstructed by their viewers; about a number of other matters. It was to be a book with a theoretical edge, but not a work of pure theory; a book about the movies, centred on Durmel.

What I have written, it seems, is a book about Durmel, reaching out into politics, psychology, religion, history. The queries mentioned

above do surface here, as they would in a consideration of the works of any talented moviemaker. But they are no longer as dominant as I expected them to be. In order to maintain their power I would have had to cut Bunuel to my pattern or choose another director, one who doesn't rob these queries of so much of their weight: Orson Weller, say, or Hitchcock, who are men of the cinema in a way that Bunuel is not.

This is a delicate subject, and it is important to get the emphasis right. I am not suggesting that Bunuel is not a moviemaker, that he is some sort of literary man who has strayed into films. Quite the opposite. There are literary moments in Bunuel's work, but these are usually flawed moments. His medium is the movies; he does not speak a borrowed or transplanted language. Hek is notx an amateur but a man who has changed the meaning of the profession. Yet the cinema itself isx not the most interesting or urgent element in this work. It is not what Bunuel does with film that counts most. It is what he gets on to it.

I appear to be creeping towards a separation of form and content, which is the last thing I want. The content of Bunuel's films is not something that exists apart from their film form; and their form in any case is part of their content. We may as well lay this bogey straight away. Form and content are not separable in any work that matters, but neither are they, as a modern orthodoxy holds, identical. They are inseparable but not indistinguishable: like close friends and Siamese twins.

Nevertheless, Bunuel's films do engage questions which tend to tug us away from our interest in the medium. They ask us, in the most provocative, sometimes insulting ways, to think about cruelty and repression and suicide and madness and a whole array of civilization's favourite discontents. They don't tell us what to think (they don't even tell us what Bunuel thinks), but they cry out to be answered, quarrelled with, prolonged, made to talk. They are looking for an argument, and I have tried to give them one.

So this is and is not a movie book. I don't mean it's something better; something weightier or classier, as if writing about large human questions were more important (or more human) than writing about the cinema. What's important is to get things right, however large or small they look. "I guess it's your father under that oak, isn't it?" Nabokov's Van Veen says to Ada. "No," she says, "it's an elm." This is a book about movies and does not pretend they are (or might have been something else. But it does not confine its interest to the cinema. I would call it a book about Bunuel's mind, if that claim didn't sound so prying and pompous and spurious. Better say it is a book about the man glimpsed in the films and beside them; and above all about the world he has so scrupulously imagined for us, the place where his dreams become ours, and he lives his second, magical, gloefully criminal life.

Two: The Lesson of the Marquis

"We must always return to Sade," Baudelaire remarked, "in order to explain evil." We may also return to Sade in order to scrutinize the very idea of evil, or of crime, or of blasphemy. Sade for Bunuel represents not vice but a form of principled pathology, a refusal of all illusions about the ruthless propensities of humankind. Sade is a philosopher, not a pornographer. In pornography, Bunuel remarks, Pierre Louys, for example, in Trois Filles de leur mere, leaves Sade standing; or panting perhaps.

Sade is the perfect atheist, close enough to belief to be enraged by it, and the sickening antics of his characters celebrate the death of a God who may be reborn at any minute. The repetitive cruelties in Sade's work, all the remorseless mounting and coupling and grabbing and piercing and drenching and worse, are signs of an immense licence, declare the freedom of a world which will not be judged. It has been

plausibly argued that Sade must believe in the God he so persistently outrages. But it is more likely that he is afraid the rest of us will feebly return to our faith. Certainly he seeks to remind himself, and has backsliding readers, that he does not believe; does notneed to, for there is nothing to believe in. His authentic passion, as Maurice Blanchot says, is not lust or pain but a furious hatred for this abolished God. Or as Sade himself put it: "The notion of God is the one fault I cannot forgive in man."

It is in this frame of mind that Sade, persuasively played by Michel Piccoli, appears in The Milky Way, reciting assorted lines culled from Justine and 120 Days of Sodom. A pious maitre d'hotel in contemporary France asserts that atheists are all either crazy or imposters,and the film instantly transports us to anm eighteenth century dungeon where Sade, elegant and authoritative, refutes and returns the charges.

> Is there a single religion which does not bear the emblem of imposture and stupidity?... This God which you forge for yourself is only a stupid dream found only in the heads of madmen... He is a phantom invented by the wickedness of men... No, Therese, no. There is no God. Nature is sufficient unto herself... Ah, if your God exists, how I hate him!

Therese, however, in chains on a bed of straw, and still bleeding from the marquis' ministrations, is the camera's answer to Sade, a seen, suffering creature rather than an abstract body made of words. She lifts her head and cries defiantly, "Yes, God exists!" Sade turns and advances menacingly towards her, and us, and the scene ends. In a further shot, scripted but not filmed, Sade closes the door and begins to undress, inflamed

by the girl's courage and virtue. The shot would only have shown what we now imagine, and in any event we have seen what we were supposed to see: Sade's tempting philosophy and a victim of what that philosophy permits. The implication, I think, isnot that Therese is right, that God exists after all, but that philosophy is not everything, and that the Inquisition, which appears elsewhere in the same film, indeed appears in the same cellar where Sade has strutted and spoken, did notk have a monopoly on dungeons and torture.

Asked who his favourite authors are, Bunuel asnwers with a speed which does not inspire perfect confidence: Sade, Engels and Fabre. Sometimes, depending on how he feels and who is asking, he substitutes Freud for Engels; swops society for the unconscious. There is mischief in these answers, of course, and a form of intellectual stylishness. They are a little too manifestly the right answers, markers on the map of Bunuel's mental world.

For all that, we should not disregard them. I shallk leave Engels and Freud for later, and say something now about Sade and Fabre - the latter being the author of the engrossing and wonderfully written Memories of an Entomologist, which I mentioned in the previous chapter; the one work kmmk, Bunuel says, which deserves to survive the most rigourous book burning, after even the Gospels and Don Quixote have hit the flames. Bunuel has been influenced by these men, but influence is not really the point, since material which is constantly modified and rearranged in the mind and on film becomes something else: a habit for Bunuel, and a clue for us.

When Friday, learning his theology in the film Robinson Crusoe, stumbles on a question of Sade's - if God, having given us our freedom, wants us to know temptation, why is he so angry when we fall, didn't he know what was going to happen? - this is a joking allusion, a whiff of free thought set against Defoe's piety. But when Bunuel himself in conversation, on the subject of death, takes up the argument of the Dialogue of the Priest and the Dying Man, we can hardly say that the ideas are not his own, or that his cheerful courage is a plagiarism. "Nothingness," Sade's dying man says, "has never held terrors for me." Bunuel: "To die and disappear for ever does not seem to me horrible."

"Look," Bunuel said in the same interview with Francico Aranda, "if my best friend, long dead, were to appear to me, touch my ear with his fingers and burn it instantaneously, I would still not believe he came from Hell. Nor would I believe as a result either in God or the Immaculate Conception, or that the Virgin could help me in examinations. I would only think: 'Luis, here you have another mystery which you don't understand.'" God himself, Sade's dying man says, needs to be explained and is the explanation of nothing, and we read twice in Philosophy in the Bedroom that men will not be happier x "for acknowledging as a cause of what they do not understand, something they understand even less."

There is a fine comic example of such tolerance for mystery in Robinson Crusoe. Crusoe's cat, without any sign of a mate on the island, manages to produce a litter of kittens. Crusoe looks inquiringly at his dog Rex, but Rex seems innocent enough, and biology, in the form of the perfectly ordinary kittens, is on his side. Crusoe abandons the puzzle and mildly remarks, in voice-over narrative, "There were many

mysteries on the island..." It is true that Fabre also offered Bunuel a model for living with whatever ignorance we cannot alter. Savoir ignorer is Fabre's phrase, a recognition of the cliff where knowledge fails, la falaise de l'inconnaissable. Why do certain insects prefer dried sheep shit when there is plenty of the fresh stuff available? "There are", Fabre answers, "all kinds of tastes in the world." "Excrement reserves for us fine and curious things, of which we should not find the equivalent on a rose."

Bunuel's authors are touchstones, then, points of reference rather than simple ~~xim~~ sources, and it is in this sense that we can see Sade and Fabre as the twin patrons of The Golden Age: forms of shorthand for the visions associated with theirm names.

"Accept these pages," Jules Janin wrote of a biography of Sade, "as in natural history one accepts a monograph on scorpions or toads..." The Golden Age begins with a study of scorpions and ends with an allusion to 120 Days of Sodom. The scorpions are awkwardly photographdd, in the manner of a deadpan, amateurish documentary - a reflection of Bunuel's inexperience, I suspect, rather than the "conscious negligence" praised by Roman Jakobson. They inhabit the hot, dry, rocky world which recurs so frequently in Bunuel's films. They fight and scurry about; are picked up and examined. We see a pair of pincers and an articulated tail in tight close-up. There is more fighting among the scorpions, and the victor then defends itself against a rat (played by an unfortunate hamster).

The rat is bitten, poisoned, grapples again with the scorpion; tumbles over and dies. Meanwhile a set of title cards, interspered with these images, have offered the following information:

> The scorpion belongs to a class of arachnids found widely in the hot regions of the ancient world. The tail is formed by a series of prismatic joints... Friend of the darkness, it burrow beneath stones to escape from the glare of the sun. Not very sociable, it ejects the intruder who comes to disturb its solitude...

At the end of the film the four legendary delinquents of 120 Days of Sodom, the Duc de Blangis and his rascally friends, stagger out of a snow-surrounded castle, their orgy over, their victims and assistants presumably all dead. A young girl then appears at the door, terrified and unaccountably still alive. The duke returns and gently escorts her back into the castle, closing the door behind him. There is a silence; a sudden scream. The duke reappears, having somehow lostk his beard and moustache in the course of this bit of housekeeping, and rejoins his friends. The duke, it must be added, has the dress and hairdo and simpering smile ordinarily worn by Christ in conventional representations.

One point of all this is that in spite of the film's trouble events and reckless shifts of scene, we have not left the world of scorpions, and therefore should not be surprised to find ourselves in the world of Sade. Sade is the scorpion of the human realm, emitter of a poison which, whatever the cost, will cure us of lies. "We must attack poison with poison," Bunuel wrote in an early review, "and film with film." Scorpions are the Sades of natural history, extreme instances of a cruel self-allegiance. To love one's neighbour as oneself, Sade says, is "in

defiance of all the laws of Nature."

The film is not as tidy or programmatic as I am making it sound, and the scorpions, of course, are not symbols. They are scorpions; well, photographed scorpions. Nevertheless, these implications are there, and worth exploring. Sade is "natural man", Baudelaire said; and the scorpions are natural nature. Sade himself, in Philosophy in the Bedroom, spoke of a life of instinct which has not been "degraded by civilization", and the phrase has a striking relevance to The Golden Age, with its mordant views of life in society as a form of taste and shameful surrender to convention. The Duc de Blangis, scoundrel, murderer and monster, isx at least, as Stendhal might have said, not a hypocrite, and Bunuel's giving him the face and manners and costume of Christ highlights the deceptions we thrive on. Blangis kills and maims for his own grim pleasure. Christianity killsx andx maims while claiming to be kind. The Golden Age conjures up Sade for us, but it also allows us to hear, in the distance, the bitter laugher of Nietzsche. "What? Is man merely a mistake of God's, or is God merely a mistake of man?"

In spite of the overt allusion to 120 Days, Bunuel's Sade is not really the tireless inventor of excesses represented by that book. There is a difference between the Sade who claims that no prompting of Nature's can be a crime, and the Sade who scours his mind for tastes and fantasies that will exhaust the very notion of Nature. There is no extravagance, he says in Philosophy in the Bedroom, which Nature "does not acknowledge as her own." Maybe. Sade at his

most extreme does everything he can to find a few.

Bunuel is closer to the humanism of the Dialogue of the Priest and the Dying Man. The dying man repents, not of his errors and vices, but of not having yielded often enough to the passions placed in him by Nature, "a much diviner inspiration" than the God praised by the priest. "I repent no having acknowledged her omnipotence as fully as I might have," he says. "I did sometimes resist her, I repent it." He spends his last hours in the arms of "six women lovelier than the light of day." The pirest too finds the arms of these women more appealing than his own arguments, and becomes "one whom Nature has corrupted, all because he had not succeeded in explaining what a corrupt nature is." This dialogue, Freddy Buache suggests, is to Bunuel what the Pensees of Pascal are to Robert Bresson, and Octavio Paz points out a clear allusion to the dialogue in Nazarin. A woman dying of the plague rejects the promise of heaven for the presence of the man she loves - "Not heaven," she murmurs, "Juan" - and the pirest Nazarin on the threshold of her house/realizes for the first time the possible irrelevance of his calling. "I have failed," he says with a mixture of humility and wounded pride.

There are many other traces of Sade in Bunuel's films. The police lecturer in The Phantom of Liberty cites Margaret Mead - "I repeat: Mead. M,E,A,D" - but appears rather to be paraphrasing Philosophy in the Bedroom on the relativity of customs. "We are all barbarians for someone," he says, an echo of Dolmance's claim that virtue and vice are merely "local ideas". Bunuel's playful extension of this thought is a world where shame is attached to eating, and where people get together

socially in order to go to the bathroom.

There is a duke in Belle de jour who likes to have girls clad only in a flimsy veil climb into a coffin and play dead: live representatives of his daughter's corpse. The duke mumbles a few choice phrases - "Only yesterday, we played together. We laughed and sang... I hope you have forgiven me... It was not my fault... I loved ~~immm~~ you too much" - and disappears beneath the coffin. There may be a memory here of a story told in 120 Days about a certain duke who has girls pretend to be dead while he manipulates what he imagines is their freshly executed body, dreaming of the pleasure the killer of such beauty must have had. Among the listeners to this tale is a character who immediately penetrates his (live) daughter, picturing her dead.

But this memory, if it is a memory, finally serves to illustrate the differences between Sade and Bunuel, which are many. I mean to suggest, that is, not only that Bunuel has made certain aspects of Sade's thought his own, but that other features of Bunuel's work are virtually the reverse of what we find in Sade.

There is the matter of tone, to begin with. We meet an acid humour in Sade, a form of sarcasm; but any comedy we may see in the sexual acrobatics of his characters is plainly unintended. Bunuel, on the other hand, finds idiosyncrasy just as amusing as placid normality, and there is almost always a touch of burlesque in his allusions to Sade. The duke in Belle de jour, for example, appears

in impeccable evening dress, wearing a monocle, and carrying a bunch of lilies and a camera on a tripod: a portrait of the pervert as photographer. When he murmurs his moving address to his daughter's surrogate, a valet interrupts with a curious question: "Monsieur le duc, shall I let the cats in?" The duke, disturbed in his rising ecstasy, says "To hell with your cats." These cats can be "explained", if we insist, as an anomaly of dream or fantasy. The scene with the duke may be an invention of the heroine's, and the cats, heard elsewhere on the soundtrack of the film, may have crept in from another region of her unconscious. But no amount of explanation will diminish the immediate comic effect of the cats' threatened intrusion.

Moreover, Bunuel's meanings are often quite different from Sade's. Although the duke appears to combine, like the characters in 120 Days, incest with necrophilia, there is really only passionate, imaginary incest - doubly imaginary, because it doesn't take place, and because the heroine is not his daughter. Bunuel's necrophiliacs are interested not in death and murder, but the reverse: the deletion of death, secular resurrection. The duke presumably loved his daughter while she was alive; he does not love her because she is dead. There is thus, strictly speaking, as Bunuel himself once said to me, no necrophilia in his films. "Well, there is necrophilia, of course, " he corrects himself. But mainly there are desperate people baffled and maddened by death's finality.

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Heathcliff, called Alejandro in Bunuel's version of Wuthering Heights, climbs into Cathy's coffin because her death cannot alter his love. The scene is clumsy, because Heathcliff has been wounded, cannot move freely, and because Jorge Mistral, the actor, is a little heavy for such exercises - one expects the coffin to creak, or Cathy's corpse to fracture. But the sense of the scene is entirely faithful to Emily Bronte's vision: love like this outlasts a mortal life, there is no fascination with death, or with corpses as corpses. Heathcliff in the novel almost opens Cathy's casket on the day of her burial. He digs through snow and soil until he reaches it, but then has a clear impression that Cathy's ghost is near him, that she is "there, not under me, but on the earth."

There is a repetition of this scene, without its particular atmospherics, in The Phantom of Liberty. The chief of the Paris police receives a telephone call from his dead sister - a smiling and modernized echo of Cathy's haunting of Heathcliff, and a joke which recalls the duke's tripod in Belle de jour. The dead, like the deviant, keep up with technology. The sister offers to explain to her brother "the true mystery of death" if he will meet her in the family vault, a place which turns out to bear a striking formal resemblance to the tomb in Bunuel's Wuthering Heights: coffins ranged along the sides, narrow stairs at the back of the frame. The police chief finds a dangling telephone and a long tress of dark hair overflowing from a closed casket. He attacks the lid with a crowbar he has brought along, but is arrested for vandalism before any secrets are disclosed to him.

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Don Jaime, in Viridiana, gets his niece to put on his dead wife's wedding dress; drugs his niece and plans her seduction. He is finally frightened by his own desire and its possible consequnces, interrupts his kisses of the girl's half-bared breast, covers her up, and leaves her. There is a double interription here, since Don Jaime's bride died on her wedding night, and his pathetic ruse is an attempt to continue the uncontinuable. And then even this charade is broken off by his fear and scruple. I shall return to this subject, but for the moment I want to note that death itself, for Bunuel, is above all an interruption.

The Phantom of Liberty is full of images carrying this suggestion: cancer, a sniper, a Nabokovian narrative which keeps simply turning its attention elsewhere, clipping stories short by leaving them behind. It is because he sees life itself as discontinuous and death as an intrusion that Bunuel is so interested in resurrection, in cancellations of the frontier between death and life. Conclusions can't be undone, but broken threads look as if they could be picked up. There is nothing religious in this interest, simply an attention to the fact that death is not only irresistible, but also unimaginable. The people we care about cannot die, at least not immediately; our affection rejects the evidence. And yet they do die, and our desire to deny their absence results only in buffoonery and further pain.

Bunuel's departure from Sade is clearest, I think, in the most insidious and haunting of his allusions to the marquis. The protaganist

of This Strange Passion, exhausted by the thought of the infidelities he quite mistakenly attributes to his wife, decides to close the subject - literally. The camera frames for us a large needle - "the curved needle dear to Buñuel's heroes", as Jacques Lacan says - a length of thick thread, a ball of cotton wool. The man has laid out this eloquent assembly on a tray and now sets off for his wife's bedroom. He ties her to the bed, but she wakes up and screams before he can get any further with his plan. Mercifully for us (to say nothing of the wife), since the close-up of the needle and thread was already more than enough - more excruciating in its horrible promise than the slashed eye in An Andalusian Dog. Roland Barthes, commenting on similar scenes in Sade, notes the regular mention of "a large needle" and "a heavy waxed thread" (Philosophy in the Bedroom), of a "long needle" and "a stout waxed thread" (Justine), of "half an ell of thick waxed thread" (120 Days). "Metonymy," Barthes writes, "is the sure road to horror: the instrument is more terrible than the torture." In material reality the torture and the instrument can hardly be separated. In a novel or a movie the instrument does usually speak more forcefully than the act, which easily topples into comic-book nastiness, as indeed it frequently does in Sade. Metonymy, we may add, in the form of synecdoche, is a major feature of the language of film: isolated faces and objects represent in concentrated form whole worlds of which they are a part. "It is the cinema's fundamental method", Jakobson says, "for transforming things into signs."

But of course the instrument is terrible here because of the particular torture it announces. "Among all the torments imagined by Sade," Barthes says, "only one is disturbing: that which consists of sewing up the anus

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or the vagina of the victim." The rest, Barthes says, is mere butchery, therefore abstract. I find quite a bit of the butchery concrete enough to make me shudder, but Barthes' claim is worth attending to, and oddly enough his remarks on Sade seem to have more to do with Bunuel than with their ostensible topic.

The acts of sewing up in Sade are chiefly a matter of pain suffered or inflicted - a man likes to have his anus stitched and then unstitched, one of Justine's tormentors sews up her vagina and anus so that he can break the threads in penetrating her - or of foreign matter being sealed into the body - syphilis in Philosophy in the Bedroom, a mouse in one of the last tortures of 120 Days. Barthes on the other hand speaks of a second castration, compounding the absence of a penis, and relegating the body of the victim to "a limbo outside sexuality." This is just what the protagonist of This Strange Passion has in mind. His wife's pain would no doubt give him pleasure, but it is not his chief objective, and he doesn't want to keep anything in, he wants to keep a horde of imaginary men out. His dream is a chastity belt written into the flesh, perfect protection for the obscure object of others' desire. It is worth noting that the situation also appears in reverse in another Bunuel film. In That Obscure Object of Desire it is the woman who chooses to wear a chastity belt, and when a piece of torn linen is sewn together at the end of the film we think not of a vagina but a hymen: purity broken only to be mended, mended only in order to torment the man who thought he possessed it. Bunuel himself claims to have been thinking of nothing at all in this scene, and now regrets having introduced the torn and sewn linen because it looks so symbolic,

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so heavily loaded with an intention it did not have. The girl is still a virgin, he insists. But then it may be that Bunuel's memory or his unconscious spoke a little louder here than he knew. Sewing up, which is cruelty and aggression in Sade, is defence and cancellation in Bunuel, and the question of what it means, in This Strange Passion and That Obscure Object of Desire, is perhaps best answered by another question; Barthes' question:

> How can sewing (which is always sewing up, making, mending) become the equivalent of: mutilating, amputating, cutting, creating an empty space?

The conflation of Sade and Fabre in Bunuel's work, the meeting of the naturalist and the apologist of nature, produces a sense of the world which belongs properly to neither figure but only to the films. Bunuel is enough of a mischief-maker to want to suggest, with Sade, that nature can't be wrong, enough of an entomologist to urge that nature, right or wrong, is what there is. The result is an implication not that nature will save us, that we have only tl shake off the shackles of a rotten civilization in order to enter "a dazzling new world", as Henry Miller hopefully put it, but that civilization can be scared and questioned by the simplest reference to anything, scorpions or sexuality, that is unmistakably natural. Bunuel's concern, though, is the questioned civilization rather than persevering nature.

The image of Bunuel as a student of insects is a reviewer's cliche, and Bunuel himself uses it fairly frequently, quite apart from his

mentions of Fabre. "The hero of El is a man who interests me in the way a scarab would, or an anpphales mosquito,xxx" Bunuel told Andre Vazin. The anopheles mosquito itself, bearer of malaria, appears unforgettably in two forms in Land Without Bread: on the photographed page of a textbook, an abstract diagram accompanying a verbal account; and immediately afterwards in a short of a trembling peasant suffering from malaria, a human record of the insect's disastrous passage. Characters in The Phantom of Libertyand Wuthering Heights are collectors of insects, and Bunuel remakrs of a particularly prepossessingx spider in the second of those films that she was the best actress he has ever worked with.

But it is important to understand what all this natural history means. Bunuel likes insects and arachnids, and is well informed about them. But he knows that most people don't care for them, knows how to use insects as a sign. A spider, or a scorpion, reflects a catholic curiosity - no creature,human or otherwise, is to be excluded from our study because we don't fancy its looks or the associations it carries with it. But Bunuel, like Sade, also means to provoke us, counts on our shivers at the sight of some of nature's less charming delegates.

Octavio Paz, in his wonderful essay on Nazarin, writes of the silence of Bunuel's films, their refusal to declare themselves on the topics they repeatedly approach:

> I don't know if Bunuel is closer to Sade or to Rousseau; it is probable that they quarrel with each other in his mind. Whatever his beliefs are on this

> subject, it is true that neither Sade's answer nor Rousseau's appears in his films. Reticence, timidity or disdain, his silence is disturbing...

It is disturbing, but his films are there to disturb us. And if at times Bunuel does appear after all to offer version of the answers of Rousseau and Sade - nature seems good because civilization is contemptible, nature merely appears to be evil because of the weight of repression that lies on it - his most consistent attitude is that of the man who thinks all answers are premature. In this, perhapsx Fabre with his cliff of the unknowable eclipses both Sade and Rousseau. Bunuel will not say what nature is, or what it is for. What is disturbing in Bunuel is the alliance of an extraordinary patience with a literally shocking modesty. Can he really have devoted a disciplined life to the elaboration of meticulous filmscapes without having anything to say? The case would be virtually unique.

Bunuel's modesty in this respect is not to be confused with neutrality or indifference. Nor is it a tactic. Bunuel is not hiding his hand, like Flaubert, so that we shall admire all the more the unseen architect. And of course we must not conclude that a film which says nothing means nothing. Bunuel's films mean a great deal,and may be read in any number of ways - well, in a large number of ways. But the absence of saying remains disconcerting. We look in vain,and sometimes with irritation, for Bunuel's recommendations or endorsements. Where is he?

Coldness is a word that is often used of Bunuel's work, and I'm not sure we should rush to reject it. "I detest human society," a banker

says in a recent, as yet unfilmed script. He is busy supplying arms and other forms of aid to terrorists. "I like Pierre, Paul and Francoise. Individuals, taken separately. It's when they're all together that I detest them." Bunuel, in private life, likes Paco, Carlos and Joanne, and is given to grumbling about humanity in general. But his films do something like the reverse. He does not, ink his best work, prefer one character to another, and his interest in human society has lasted an observant lifetime.

Coldness may be a form of clarity, an abstinence from emotional muddle. It may be another name for the modesty I have described, and we should not dilute it by making large claims for Bunuel's warmth. "Do you know that the common denominator of Bunuel, Renoir and Ford is, " Serge Silberman, Bunuel's producer, asked an interviewer. "It's human warmth. That is the most important thing." Silberman's affection for his friend speaks eloquently here, but it's hard to imagine a more serious misrepresentation of that friend's work. Bunuel's virtues are precisely what separate him from Ford and Renoir. The hero of The Golden Age, in a gesture which makes W C Fields look like Santa Claus, kicks over a blind man in order to beat him to a taxi. Francisco Aranda can't resist the attempt to set the record straight, and reminds us of Bunuel's earlier charitable work on behalf of the blind. There is something very funny about these bids for ethical rescue, even though Bunuel occasionally dabbles in them himself. He will insist that he is not himself a sadist, or a psychopath, or a fetishist. Well, he's not, but neither are his films.

"I treat all my characters with love," Bunuel once said in an interview.* "For me they are human beings, and I love them, all of them." And elsewhere: "Their very wretchedness, it seems to me, should be just one more reason to love such people." This is eloquent and just, and I have written myself that Bunuel's lucidity is a form of compassion. It may well be that this is a final implication of the films, a conclusion we can reach. But this temptin vocabulary is far too pious for the films themselves, and amounts to a denial of, or a sheepish apology for, their ferocity. Nature, Fabre says, knows no pity; and he doesn't hesitate to speak of his own "cruel studies", or to describe himself as the "torturer" of his specimens. Compassion, love, charity, warmth: how are we to connect these words with the cruelty which leaps out of the films, which event the most casual observer cannot miss? Is it possible to love the murderous Jaibo in The Young and the Damned? The beggar rapist in Viridiana? The man who cuts open a woman's eye in An Andalusian Dog? The flighty protagonists of The Exterminating Angel and The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie? Tristana, as she pretends to summon a doctor for her husband, and calmly lets the old man die, gasping, unaided?

Bunuel does something better than loving his characters. He respects them as they are, untouched by programmes or preconceptions or squeamishness. This respect is not infallible, and when it fails, it fails with women. Viridiana, for example, is pilloried rather than observed, and the two girls who make up a single character in That Obscure Object of Desire are compounded into a man-eating monster. But a capacious, uninterfering respect is Bunuel's usual relation to

his imagined world. Strangenesses are not attacked or justified, they are registered as known dimensions of humanity, possibilities of behaviour, and Bumel's cruelty is very close to Fabre's - an ostensibly cruel scrutiny - and quite unlike Sade's.

Cruelty for Sade is a pleasure and a right, the reflection, as Lacan has suggested, of a sort of categorical imperative. "Cruelty", Sade writes, "is simply the energy in a man civilisation has not yet altogether corrupted: therefore it is a virtue, not a vice."

> I have no real right of possession over such-and-such a woman, but I have incontestable rights to the enjoyment of her; I have the right to force from her this enjoyment, if she refuses me it for whatever the cause may be.

There are no rights of this kind in Bumel's films, which are governed by more familiar, even conservative moral laws. It is simply that these laws are broken as often as they are kept, and cruelty for Bumel, apart from being a perspective like Fabre's, an approach which <u>looks cruel</u> to us, is a major feature of reality. It is what he sees when he turns his camera on us, andk his coldness is what allows him to see it without blinking. It is difficult to view <u>Tristana</u>, for example, as anything other than an icy film; even more difficult to perceive how much that iciness shows us, and how much humanity there is in these chill regions. Why is humanity so often associated with warmth? As Pauline Kael says, "It's hard to love man; Hollywood movies pretend it's easy, but every detail gives the show away."

This talk of coldness and entomology becomes false if it creates

the impression that Bunuel merely studies already formed objects and creatures. He does find his material rather than imagine it, I think, in spite of his own frequent protests to the contrary. But what he finds and what he does with it depend on a strong set of personal preferences, and no doubt personal needs and nightmares. If Bunuel sees so much cruelty in the world, it is not just because it is there. Fellini probably has a vision of things no rosier than Bunuel's, but no one would think of calling his films cold, and the grotesque in Fellini is usually the sign of an abundance, rather than of difference and isolation. Fellini's camera is cruel enough, pitiless in its searching of flesh and deformity, while Bunuel's films are relatively kind in this respect; cruel only in their extraordinary interest in cruelty.

All films are littered with the traces of decisions which point to the personality of their makers. And of course, except in the case of Land Without Bread, it is deceptive to speak of the characters in Bunuel's films as people. They are characters, which is different. They are compounds of dialogue and gesture and the physical features of actors, framed in a particular set of shots, and articulated by a particular manner of editing. We think of them as people, about whom a director or an audience might have feelings ("I love them, all of them"), because that is part of the pretence of most films - and of most nineteenth century novels, and of all soap operas, past and present. The fictional figure who seems to exist apart from the screen or the paper which is his only kingdom is one of the great triumphs and lures of realism. I don't think we can, as a matter of ordinary critical practice, give up talking of these characters as people without losing our sense of how these films

(and novels, and the rest) actually address us, or without falling into a hopeless fussiness ("Viridiana, or rather the cluster of signifiers collected together under the spurious authority of that imaginary proper name..."). It is as false, Barthes says, to suppress the character as to take him out of the book. But there is no reason for us to be deluded by our own vocabulary. Behind a film are sets or locations, actors, a script, a watchful director: not a photographed truth. The truth of a film resides not in what it copies but in what it creates, in the connections it is able to suggest between its simulated world and the unsimulated, far less selective world of our everyday lives.

The man shivering with malaria in Land Without Bread is not an actor, of course; and the harsh, cramped village where he lives is not a location, it is his home. It is absurd, and unkind, to confuse documentaries with fiction. The truth of a documentary does come, in part, from what it copies, from the fidelity of its transcription of what is already there. But only in part. Even documentary films are made of frames, as Mallarme once said poems are made of words, and the frames are composed and ordered by a director. We see what he chooses tok have us see: not necessarily a fiction, but a perspective.

Only a perspective? Is that all? "I have thought of everything that can be thought of in that line," Sade wrote of the extravagances of his imagination, "but I have certainly not done everything I have thought of, and shall certainly never do it." The fictional St Florent, in Justine, appears to be a masterful Sadeian hero, a man emancipated from scruple. Yet Sade describes him in a footnote as a historical monster: "this villain", "this wretched creature existed in this same Lyon". The orgies and prisons of Sade's biography, Barthes suggests, are modest echoes of the colossal cruelties of his work: "He put a little of his work into his life." Barthes also insists on the impossibility of much of what Sade describes: complications of position, contorsions of the body, endurance of the victims, infinitely repeated orgasms of the principals, "everything goes beyond human nature." The obsessive sexual activity in Sade's novels is a creation of discourse, conceivable only in language. "language, Barthes writes, can "deny, forget, dissassociate itself from the real: written shit does not smell." And Gilbert Lely remarks that "language will extend its mercy" to the murdered and mutilated creatures of Sade's fiction: they have been hurt only in words.

These claims are true enough, but their truth is a little obvious, even trivial: words are not things. In part the claims reflect the fashion, rampant in France and elsewhere these last twenty years, for ~~intishingxxx~~ canonising language, latching on to the notion of discourse as a magical alternative to naivete. And in

part they constitute an alibi for Sade very similar to the efforts made for the ethical rescue of Bunuel. There are two serious misunderstandings here.

Words are not things, but they are not phantoms. They are as much a part of continuing life as inflation or the weather, which are not things either. Behind a great deal of sophisticated talk about language and discourse lies an extraordinarily simple, materialist view of what is real: the solid, the tangible, the wounds St Thomas needed to examine in order to believe. The significant impossibility in Sade is not a practical one - this can't be done except in words - but a moral and conceptual one - this is literally unthinkable. Or rather, Sade has thought of it, but can we? Barthes touches on this problem at the tail-end of a sentence, speaking of things which are "inconceivable in reality, even in an imaginaryr reality." The question is whether anything is inconceivable any more; that is the boundary Sade is out to test. We can't blame him for the excesses of history, which is full of horrors which we call unimaginable but exist all the same, and we must be grateful to him for his diligent picturing of the unpicturable. We do him no service by insisting on the linguistic nature of his performance, since we rob him thereby of all his urgency, and blind ourselves to the most insidious of his puzzles: what, exactly, is to stop us from putting into practice the most savage of our dreams?

And then Sade's discourse, to borrow the magical word, is hypothetical in an interesting sense; speculative; a matter of deeds performed not merely in language, but merely in thought. "I have thought of everthing that

can be thought of in that line..." "One thinks," the young Eugenie says in Philosophy in the Bedroom, "but one does not do." Now Sade in reality and Eugenie in fiction managed quite a bit of doing all the same, but the discourse in general is to be read as a challenge rather than a report, and in this it resembles Bunuel's films, many Surrealist texts and activities, the writings of some modern philosophers, and the practice of psycho-analysis, at least as John Wisdom understands this discipline. Its relation to the world is that of a provocation or a riddle or a paradox. It is true, Wisdom says, that philosophers and psycho-analysts are not speaking literally, but it is dangerous to say so:

> It is even dangerous to say that their paradoxes are paradoxes. For only in the shock of taking a paradox literally will people give that attention to concrete detail which will enable them to break old habits of grouping and recognize not merely that an old classification blinds and distorts but how it does.

Pauline Kael writes in a similar vein about people who protect themselves from such shocks by taking a violent remark as "just a metaphor." The discourse, then, is neither literal nor figurative nor simply linguistic but, in a very curious way, both aggressive and theoretical. What if, it says, and then musters all the material detail it can behind the speculation.

It is also a fragile discourse, runs the risk of being merely language in a sense not intended by Lely and Barthes: just talk. Bunuel, as I have already said, decribed An Andalusian Dog as "a desperate and passionate call to murder"; Andre Breton argued that the simplest Surrealist act was to fire a pair of pistols into a crowd. But both men would have been horrified to hear of actual murders committed in

their name, and Albert Camus once suggested that Breton must have been regretting his famous remark ever since he made it. The game of paradox and provocation may turn out to be frivolity and radical chic, and Stendhal or Nietzsche would make short work of such a precarious pose. The duc de Blangis is not a hypocrite, but what about Sade? If his life lags behind his work, is he only indulging his fertile fantasy?

On the other hand, we cannot want him to have committed all those monstrosities for the sake of authenticity. We cannot wish that An Andalusian Dog was really a desperate and passionate call to murder. Authenticity and sincerity are awkward, shifting and ordinarily very different notions. In this kind of discourse they are entangled with each other. We cannot want authenticity in these cases - real murders and maiming, to which language cannot extend its mercy - and yet without it the discourse floats in limbo, has the look of insincerity, of mere flirtation with violence. We cannot speak of the necessary illusions of art, for that is to miss the specificity of this art, its attempt to explore the borders of the imagined and the real. "To be blind to Bunuel's meanings as a way of being open to 'art'," Pauline Kael writes, "is a variant of the very sentimentality he satirizes." It is also true that to be blind to Bunuel's art is to miss the most powerful and durable of his meanings. But that is another story. For the moment we must accept the erratic nature of this form of discourse, its hits and misses. It may bolw us over, itx may seem an empty game. There is perhaps nothing else to say about it in general; plenty to say about particular cases.

Maurice Blanchot wrote of Antonin Artaud that he had lucidly undergone "the test of the marvellous", meaning he had committed himself to genuine madness. Artaud's obsession with feces, his notion of returning St Patrick's cane to Ireland, his belief in a conspiracy of angels against him were, as Roger Shattuck says, "neither jokes nor metaphors." Bataille took Artaud's terrible adventure as a verdict on the Surrealists, who mostly managed to avoid all such wrecks and disasters. But did he want them to succomb? What would that have proved?

We cannot wish them mad, or that An Andalusian Dog was really a call to murder. We cannot want Sade to have committed all his imagined monstrosities for the sake of authenticity. Authenticity and sincerity are awkward, shifting and ordinarily very different concepts. In this kind of discourse they are entangled with each other. Authenticity in such cases - real murders and maiming, to which language cannot extend its mercy - would destroy their challenge, convert them into pathology; and yet without it the discourse floats in limbo, has the look of insincerity, of mere flirtation with violence.

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Three: In the Museum of Strangeness

Bunuel speaks of his relationship with Surrealism in the past tense. "When I was a Surrealist," he says, or "In the days of Surrealism" - as if Surrealism were a team or a club or a now defunct political party. I have an impulse to quarrel with this usage. If Surrealism, as Octavio Paz says, is neither a party nor a religion nor a school nor a poetics but"an attitude of the human spirit,", then Bunuel can hardly be said to have given it up. His fidelity to that old revolt lends a striking constancy to his broken and mended career, and I have written elsewhere that he has been a "lifelong Surrealist."

But it is an old revolt, and Bunuel's usage is better than mine. To be sure, Marcel Jean thinks of a "timeless Surrealism", and Maurice Nadeau suggests that Surrealism, "understood as a certain disposition

not to transcend reality but to explore its depths", is "eternal". It's just that if we try to give a concrete meaning to these phrases we discover that Surrealism, as ah bag of disruptive tricks, has found a home in advertising - beds on beaches, deodorants perched in mountain gorges - and in its ampler acceptations can be encountered absolutely anywhere, if we decide that it's what we are looking for. Of course the movement was always apt to colonize whatever it thought might serve its heady cause. Andre Breton conscripted Emily Bronte, the Marquis de Sade and many others, and the first number of La Revolution surrealiste carried a picture of Buster Keaton. Ado Kyrou, in Le Surrealisme au cinema, regards W C Fields as "surrealist in everything", while Renoir's Rules of the Game is "surrealist in essence." Alain Resnais is "surrealist in his baroque madness" and Antonioni is "surrealist in his details." Much earlier, Antonin Artaud had decided that if there was a state or degree of mind which could be called Surrealism, then the Marx Brothers' Animal Crackers "shared in it fully". Bunuel himself, introducing a programme of films in Madrid in 1930, said there was "more genuine Surrealism" in the movies of Chaplin, Keaton, Ben Turpin, Harold Lloyd and Harry Langdon than in the works of Man Ray. Surrealism here becomes a name for whatever we like or think we need, and once we have started to talk, as both Kyrou and J H Matthews do, of "involuntary Surrealism", we have lost any chance we might have had of making sense. We are simply waving a flag.

I want to say then that Bunuel, like many others, found in Surrealism support for his own pursuit of strangeness, for his own

interest in repressed or forgotten aspects of expeiience, both mental and material, both personal and social. When this strangeness migrated to areas which were not favourite Surrealist quarries, he followed it rather than the movement. It is thus possible to say both that he has remained loyal to a certain thrust of Surrealism and that he has left it behidd. On the other hand, he is unequivocal about his debt. "An Andalusian Dog would not exist," he wrotex, "if Surrealism did not exist," and hex told Andre Bazin and Jacques Donio-Valcroze that Surrealism taught him to see reality differently. It's not entirely clear that what Bunuel learned from Surrealism is ~~xxxxxxx~~ what Breton and others thought they were teaching; but what he learned, or for that matter what Magritte or Miro learned, might well provoke us to rethink our notion of what Surrealism is, or might be. Bunuel, for example, saw surrealism as a discipline, which is, at first glance, an odd notion.

For the moment, though, we need to know what it was, as a movement. Romanticism's last stand, as Cyril Connolly thought? A particular product of l'entre-deux-guerres? Like its cousin, Anglo-American Modernism, it did not survive the Second World War except in diffuse, belated, or eternal forms.

Breton thought that the historical success or failure of Surrealism could be judged only by its efficacy in provoking a grave and generalized crise de conscience. Undoubtedly it failed in this respect, but the criterion is odd, since the vast crise de conscience known as modernity was well under way by the time of the first Surrealist manifesto in 1924, and in any case the Surrealists could hardly provoke something of which they themselves were so plainly a symptom.

The world they wished to shake had already half crumbled, and it is because they don't appear to have realized this that many Surrealists seem provincial. John Berger memorably says of Magritte that "he hated the familiar and the ordinary too much to turn his back on them". The Surrealists could not turn their backs on the bourgeoisie. They were adepts of insult and invective, always arraigning public men and addressing open letters to figures of authority. They wanted the prisons emptied and the army disbanded. They were for "sabotage on principle," as Camus wrote. "All that is doddering, suspicious, infamous, sullying and grotesque, " Breton said, "id wontained for me in that single word: God." Paul Eluard called Cocteau a swine and a stinking beast, and remarked, "Being careful never prevented anyone from being vile."

Walter Benjamin, in an early article, pointed to the elements of bluff and provocation in all this, but he also thought the Surrealists were the first people since Bakunin to have a radical conception of freedom. They perceived their world as caught up in an ecstatic conspiracy of respectability, and according to Benjamin they saw through the "unholy coupling" of idealistic moralizing and fierce political practice. There was nothing philosophical about their scepticism; it flared up with the sense of betrayal which was so large a legacy of the Great War. Like many others, of quite different ages and temperaments, the Surrealists felt they had been fed on deception, that the very notion of truth was a casualty of the war. Ezra Pound spoke of "old men's lies" and "disillusions as never told in the old days." "Surely it must be realized," Louis Aragon

wrote, "that the face of error and the face of truth cannot fail to have identical features."

There is an element of naivete in this outrage, of course, particularly in France, where artists had been railing against the supposed ideals of the bourgeoisie for nearly a century. But a certain naivete is inseparable from the Surrealist's energy. "Nothing is revolutionary except candour," Robert Desnos said. When they were no longer shocked by the hypocrisy and fatuousness of their comfortable contemporaries, they were no longer Surrealists.

The rebelling Paris students of May 1968 borrowed Surrealism for the walls of the Sorbonne, where they quoted Breton and scribbled assertions like "Dream is truth" and "Any view of things that is not strange is false." This last phrase makes a fine echo to Chirico's much earlier suggestion that we should "live in the world as if in an immense museum of strangeness", but it was not Surrealism that drove the students to the barricades in 1968. Surrealism, alon with many other sources, offered an attractive rhetoric, and we may feel, with the sweep of hindsight, that Surrealism was above all a rhetoric. It was not exactly an aesthetics that yearned to be a politics, as Susan Sontag shrewdly guessedy. It was an overreaching politics that could not leave the realm of romance.

In the Spanish Civil War, Breton thought,

> much more is at stake than the fate of the young Spanish Republic. The question at issue is this: is man condemned to remain the prey of his fellow men...?

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This perspective does not preclude practical sympathy, but the drift towards abstraction is clear. A number of Surrealists (Breton, Aragon, Eluard, Peret, Unik) joined the French Communist Party as early as 1927, and placed the movement, as they put it, at the services of the Revolution. They took courageous stands, were firm and eloquent about the Moscow Trials ("abominable and inexpiable") and Breton remained close to Trotsky. But there is a discomfort in all this, a sense that Surrealism's universalizing dreams could only be cramped by any party - let alone by the stiff-minded Communist Party of the age of Stalin. It is to the movement's credit that it sought the total liberation of man, refused all partial versions; but the risk of being neither a school nor a religion nor a party is that you may be nothing at all. An attitude of the human spirit may be just that: an attitude. This is what Nadeau calls the "hidden vice " of Surrealism: the notion that wishes are horses, that postures are a form of activism.

The situation is crystallised in the controversy surrounding Aragon's ugly poem 'Red Front'. Working class neighbourhoods of Paris (Belleville, St Denis, Ivry, Javel, Malakoff) are summoned to revolt ~~in this piece~~:

> Bend the lampposts like foetuses of straw...
> Shoot down the cops
> Comrades
> Shoot down the cops...
> Fire at Leon Blum...
> The flash of gunfire lends the landscape
> a gaiety unknown till now
> They are executing engineers and doctors...

The blue eyes of the Revolution
shine with necessary cruelty
USSR USSR USSR
USSR.

One needs the French to catch the awful cleverness of the last lines: "une cruauté necessaire/SSSR, SSSR, SSSR,/SSSR" (ec-ess-aire, ess-ess-ess-er, etc.)

Aragon was accused, not unreasonably we may think, of incitement to violence, and the Surrealists offered an odd defence. Poetic language, they said, was not an "exact expression of thought", not to be judged by its "immediate content." The poem does not propose individual acts of violence, it merely offers a picture of a possible future. Aragon would not have written "Shoot down the cops" in prose, in an article.

This seems to say that Surrealism is only literature after all - a denial of all the movement's bravestx and most flamboyant proclamations ("We have nothing to do with literautre," "Surrealism is not a poetic form"). We meet again, in a particularly vulnerable guise, the hypothetical quality I described in my last chapter. Breton, dissatsfied, as well he might be, with this line of thought, later suggested that things might have been different if the poem had corresponded tox an actual political situation - if the French Communist Party, for example, had been preaching active, local revolt. Then the poem would have meant what it said literally, and the Surrealists would not honourably have been able to refuse to participate in the agitation. But that wasn't the situation, and we can almost hear Breton's sigh of relief.

There are two faces to this problem; indeed the two faces are — the problem. Surrealism was full of dangerous talk, metaphors meant to be mistaken for assertions - with the proviso that they could always be reclaimed as metaphors if the going got rough. "Half-metaphorical bombs," as Roger Shattuck says, "can end up killing real people." And yet there was a persevering innocence in this very frivolity. It was dangerous talk, but it was only talk, and the Surrealists themselves were among the last to see how hypothetical their provocations were. The chief criticism we can make of them in this respect is not that they were too violent, or insufficiently violent, but that they did not take their own mischief seriously enough, never really expected it to leave the realm of the game, and so had no proper sense of the possible human consquences of their antics. I'm thinking here of the defence of Aragon's poem, of course; the poem itself is much worse than mischievous, however we take it.

And yet. There is a good deal to be said for rhetoric and romance if they are all you have. If liberty is a phantom, as the title of a Bunuel film suggests, it is essential to talk about it. Its return to reality may depend upon our familiarity with the idea. "The very word <u>liberty</u>," Breton wrote, "is exalting. I think it is capable of preserving, indefinitely, the old human fanaticism." And again, prophetically enough: "It would be wrong for man to allow himself to be intimidated by a few monstrous historical failures: he is still free to <u>believe</u> in his freedom." There is a certain negligence, even callousness, in such remarks ("a few monstrous historical failures"), but there is also a fine fidelity to a battered belief. Breton saw the

imagination as the only index of possibility; wanted the "already thought" to make way for the "thinkable"; waged pitiless war on the shabby reality he found all too many of his contemporaries settling for. He could be vague and superstitious on this subject, but it is usually clear that he wants more reality, not less, or even a different one. "The admirable thing about the fantastic," he said, "is that it is no longer fantastic: there is only the real." The fantastic is not an alternative to the given world. It is a promise, a hint of what a larger, less constricting world might be like, since a life that can be imagined can also be desired. If Surrealism, as Camus thought, "is perhaps only an unbearable form of widdom", it is also, as he added, a sign that wisdom is not a comfort. It is in this sense that we should understand the Surrealists' insistence on dreams and automatic writing, their quest for the marvellous in everyday life, their canonization of chance and romantic love. "Perhaps he has secrets for changing life?" a timid voice says in Rimbaud's A Season in Hell. The Surrealists thought they had the secrets.

They didn't. And the one thing they had that looked like a secret turned out to be something else. Surrealism, Breton said when he borrowed the word from Apollinaire, "designates a certain psychic automatism, a near equivalent to the dream state." Later he multiplied definitions:

> Surrealism, n. Pure psychic automatism by whose means it is intended to express, verbally or in writing, or in any other manner, the actual functioning of thought. Dictation of thought, in the absence of all control by reason and outside of all aesthetic or moral preoccupations.

There is a great deal of confusion here. When Breton speaks, elsewhere, of automatic writing as "a true photography of thought", he has forgotten the complications of the camera and the dark room, just as the above definition ignores all the implications of conscious intention carried by the word express and virtually all of the ordinary meanings of the word thought. This last word crops up with a startling frequency in Surrealist declarations: "thought in the plenitude of its freedom" (Magritte), "to give birth to the thought inside me" (Artaud), "the disinterested play of thought" (Breton). The Surrealists appear to have had none of Freud's sense of the puzzle and paradox involved in the very notion of an unconscious thought - a thought having nothing to do with reason poses no problem for Breton in the above quotation - and they also used thought in a quite different way, to signify, precisely, reason, consciousness, academic intellect and all the rest of their heavy-breathing enemies. Their "theoretical equipment" was not so much "impoverished", as Michel Beaujour has suggested, as non-existent. Still, this is not to say they were not on to something.

"The actual functioning of thought" must mean the free flow of the mind, conscious and unconscious, and the trick or secret which everyone situates at the centre of Surrealism is thus, as Octavio Paz says, not a method but a goal. Automatic writing is not automatic; it is merely less fettered, less censored than rational or utilitarian discourse - or if we wish to push our scepticism a little further, it is fettered or censored in different other fashions. It is an "engine of war", as Maurice Blanchot says, "against reflection and language." It is as

much a production as any text (or painting, or film), but the manner of its production is the mirror of a hope.

The hope is not trivial. We could all use a little more liberty than we've got, and it would help if we know how to wish for it. The Surrealists often made the mistake of thinking their questions were answers, but the questions themselves are urgent enough. "If you look at something and try to find out what it means," Magritte said, "you end up by seeing not the thing itself but the questions that it has raised." The thingx here, perhaps, is Surrealism.

The Surrealists sought strangeness, as I have said, or what they more often called the marvellous. These are secondary terms, depending for their meaning on a primary sense of what is ordinary, not-wonderful. Surrealism is escapism, however much its apologists shy away from the word. But an attempted escape is not a negligeable deed. First because escape is sometimes possible. Lines like Eluard's

> The earth is as blue as an orange
> Never an error words do not lie

not only elude all plausible interpretation, they also enact a form of freedom. Words do not lie because there is not limit to what we can do with them, and calling earth and oranges blue may be seen as a model for all kinds of non-verbal liberties. Secondly because even failed escapes inform us about our prison, and: this, I think, is Surrealism's largest lesson.

The movement produced some very thin painting, and some vacuous poetry. But it also offeredx an instigation to Miro, Eluard, Bunuel, Magritte. And the striking thing about the work of these men is not its interest in a realm of the arbitrary and magical but on the contrary its embattled engagement with things as they are, its pursuit of an intricate human truth. Respecting Breton's dream of freedom, they managed to stand it on its head. It is because freedom is finally impossible that it is indispensable to dream of it. "Surrealism," Bunuel told Carlos Fuentes, "taught me that man is never free yet fights for what he can never be." This strikes me as rather too absolute in its abandonment of hope, but Bunuel, to paraphrase John Berger, hates captivity too much to think of living anywhere else.

Bunuel said later that he had excluded "all narrative sense", "all logical association", from An Andalusian Dog, but the film in fact attacks narrative sense quite systematically and replaces logical association with chains of metaphors that seem incoherent only at a first, careless glance. "Dali and I," Bunuel told Francois Truffaut, "mercilessly rejected anything that ~~might have meant~~ could mean anything." This is to take meaning itself as a measure; indeed is to take it as seriously as the most ardent rationalist could wish.

It has become customary to attribute to Bunuel the excellences of this film, and of The Golden Age, and to give the failed or strident

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jokes to Dali. Steven Kovacs, quoting the above remark, has recently tried to set the record straight, rather schematically crediting falir and image to Dali and structure and morality to Bunuel. In fact, as Kovacs himself comes to see, there are only two things tok be said about this collaboration: Dali and Bunuel were close friends at the time of writing, each eagerly accepting the other's suggestions, and many of the images in the films (donkeys, ants, orchestras, priests, famous paintings) can be seen to belong to the repertory of both; and Bunuel directed the films, converted whatever there was in the scripts into movies.

An Andalusian Dog begins quietly, like a fairy tale with the pace of an old-fashioned realistic novel. A title card says, "Once upon a time", and a burly fellow, who happens to be Bunuel, appears in his shirtsleeves, smoking, sharpening a razor, testing it against his thumbnail. He steps out on to a balcony and takes a look at the moon. We see a young woman's face in close-up. A hand holds her left eye open,while another hand approaches the eye with a razor. A cloud passes across the moon, as though slicing through it, and in a very large close-up, the razor cuts into ~~the~~ an eye, which leaks matter immediately. A new title card says, "Eight years later."

People still gasp when this scene is shown. There is no way of reducing the intimacy of its violence. The fact that the same young woman appears soon after in the film, both eyes happily intact, and the fact that the sliced eye, on inspection, can be seen to be that of an animal - of one of the two dead donkeys, I take it, which are later

draped over two grand pianos - are not as consoling as we might hope. I don't gasp any more, but I do have to sit tight in the cinema, energetically reminding myself that the eye being sliced is not the woman's, that it is neither human nor alive.

Much nonsense has been written about this eye, but it is clear that however Bunuel and Dali arrived at the image, there is nothing accidental about its place in the film. It assaults the very organ we are viewing with, blinds us by proxy, and our physical disgust and fright are complicated by an obscure sense that some sort of ugly justice has been done, that we've got what we deserve. Artaud had written earlier that a film should come as "a shock to the eye, drawn so to speak from the very substance of the eye", and An Andalusian Dog renders this figure with horrible literality. The casual narrative adds to the effect. We didn't think he was sharpening the razor for that, and the cards suggest an idiotic storyteller who just doesn't know what is in his tale. In later films, I should add, Bunuel rarely finds actual violence necessary. He gets quite terrifying effects results by the equivalent of simply showing the razor in the vicinity of the eye. Our own fears do the rest.

And so the movie continues, setting up narrative movements only to knock them down. The woman leaves a room and finds herself in exactly the same place. Later she leaves the same room through the same door and finds herself on a beach. A man is shot indoors, and the scene changes around him as he falls. By the time he hits the ground he

in a meadow. Not even mortalixty can tie up a story. The protagonist seems to die more than once, only to reappear in the situation he had left behind - a narrative version of stepping into the same room twice. Meanwhile the title cards, at intervals, proceed with their placid, crazy commentary: "Towards three in the morning"; "Sixteen years before"; "In the spring."

Even so, the imagery of the film keeps edging towards coherence, and Bunuel then gives in, with comic helplessness, to the associations which suggest themselves. A pair of books turns into a pair of revolvers: the opposite, I take it, of paper tigers. A man stares at his hand, striking the pose that is found in Magritte's painting The Mysterious Suspicion. Ants swarm out of a hole in the middle of this hand, and the movie suddenly dissolves to a close-up of a woman's armpit, which in turn is followed by a close-up of a sea-urchin's spine, which dissolves to a head seen from directly above, in an iris. It is the head of an androgynous-looking girl who isx staring at a severed hand, prodding it with a cane. An itch in the palm modulates into mutilation; almost a picture of censorship. Another sequence. The skull pattern on a death's head moth is held in an iris shot. A young man claps his hand to his mouth, then removes it: he has no mouth. The young woman who is with him angrily outlines her mouth with lipstick, and the man's face promptly grows hair where his mouth was. The ~~girlxdix~~ woman is startled,and looks hurriedly at her armpit, which is now completely hairless. The furry moth has triggered a series of allusions to the unseen, unmentioned hair that is on everyone's mind.

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More generally, love and death (or perhaps love and damage) are connected throughout the film, in a travesty of Tristan. The young man watches the androgynous girl get run over by a car and becomes panicky with lust. He chases his companion round the room and over the bed, and as he fondles her, his eyes roll up, showing their whites, his head tilts back and blood trickles from the corner of his mouth. There is a similar image in The Golden Age, where the lover, blood all over his face, rabidly murmurs, "My love, my love, my love, my love, my love." A recognizable nauseam, or terror, lurks behind these shots. In 1960 Bunuel added a sound track to An Andalusian Dog which alternates between Wagner and a splendid old tango, complicating this disturbing effect considerably. At times the couple chasing round the furniture actually appears to be dancing to the music. The film at these pâintsis very funny, and yet seems genuinely obsessed.

What all this means, I think, is that An Andalusian Dog invites two quite different fomrs of response. One is the response to mystery, to unfathomable nonsense, and the film's most hilarious and most haunting moment is of this kind. The young man cycles towards a rendez-vous. Suddenly his impulse or energy gives out, as if the clock of his life, or his will, had run down. A high-angle shot picks up the faltering bicyle; there is a wobble or two, and the young man falls sideways, like a tree or a somnambulist; he cracks his head on the pavement, and lies still, apparently dead. This scene is not at all funny in description, but its impact on the screen is comparable to that of Chaplin's or Keaton's magical rumbers. The actor seems to have ridden his bike into a dream, and the camera has carefully followed

him. The scene not only cheats interpretation, it makes the very idea of interpretation seem some kind of joke.

The other invited response seeks interpretation, or rather is interpretation: a compulsion to connection which not even the flightiests of us can resist. The important thing here is to see interpretation neither as a victory (we have cracked them case, solved the riddle) nor as a defeat (our brave delirium capitulated to reason after all) but as a fact of life: what has to happen, except in the rarest of instances, like that of the falling cyclist, where we are entitled to speak of something like Surrealist grace. It is because interpretation is inevitable that Dali and Bunuel are determinded to give it such a fight.

The cyclist, for example, wears various frilly additions (haribows, a sort of bib, a sort of dress) over an ordinary lounge suit, and has a striped box hanging from his neck. The stripes echo those of the tie worn by the eye-slasher in the opening scene, and the box itself later turns out to contain the tie, or one that is indisnguishable from it. Just before the androgynous girl is knocked down, a policeman picks up the severed hand which so interests her, and puts it in the striped box. Some time afterwards the cyclist, back in his frills and with the box once again around his neck, is seen lying on a bed. A new character shows up, who turns out to be the cyclist's double, played by the same marvellous, haunted actor, Pierre Batcheff, and rips off the frills and throws them, with the box, out of the window. The box, broken, appears on a beach near the end of the film.

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What are we to make of this? Nothing. We cannot give thematic meaning to the box and the frills unless we are content to miss the main joke and confuse a parody of significance with the real thing. We tend to collect these instances of repetition and hang on to them, because we are in the habit of taking repetitions as pointers, but no sooner have we started our collecting than the extravagant laughter of Bunuel and Dali becomes almost audible. The box serves, Steven Kovacs says, "as an irrational focus of attention" and keeps reappearing in order to "affirm its nonexistent importance." This is not to say that it has no meaning, only that its function is to declare war on meaning; that is its meaning.

The war is carried into the enemy camp here. More often Dali and Bunuel try to ignore meaning, unload the unexamined contents of their minds. This material is not uninterpretable, it is merely untinterpreted by them or by the film. One of the early possibilities for a title of the movie was Dangerous to Lean Inwards, a play on the warning found in French trains about not leaning out, 'Dangereux de se pencher en dehors'. I have given some examples of the film's delayed or subterranean coherences, but the most elaborate instance involves a heterogeneous assembly of objects which the protagonist finds lying behind him. He has chased the young woman round the room, and has been drooling with desire. He strokes her breasts through her dress. A sudden cut shows the breasts naked; another cut places a pair of bare buttocks in his hands; another returns us to the covered breasts. The woman grabs a tennis racket to defend

herself, and the man, baffled, turns and picks up two pieces of rope which are lying on the floor. He puts them over his shoulders and begins to tug, as if at an enormous weight. Gradually his cargo comes into view: cork mats, melons, two live priests, the grand pianos with the donkeys hanging over them. It is essential to understand two things here. This curious collection doesn't mean anything at the level of intention, it is not a symbolic design; it can hardly mean nothing, even to the least psychō-analytically minded among us. Bunuel himself insists on this difference. He told me once that he had received letters from a professor in Hamburg and a captain of artillery in Saragossa, both interpreting the man's miscellaneous load as the burden of his inescapable past. That wasn't what we meant, Bunuel says, we didn't mean anything, we just proceeded by random association - and a little bit by contrariness, playing with the viewer's expectations. What was the man going to do with the ropes? Strangle the woman? Well, no, here he comes with cork, melons, priests and so on. And yet Bunuel does not suggest that this interpretation is wrong, indeed he takes the odd convergence of opinions as a sign that it is probably right.

I think it helps to see An Andalusian Dog, and much of Surrealism, as an exercise in nonsense, as nonsense was understood, for example, by Lewis Carroll, who fulfilled nearly every Surrealist prophecy before it was even made. "What has been understood," Eluard wrote in a poem, "no longer exists." Bunuel told a friend that Surrealism was not to be confused with idiocy, although they "share something of the same quality"; and R P Blackmur's dubious definition of an idiot's exploit ("a dive beneath the syntactic mind") is a fine description of nonsense.

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What happens when we meet a pice of genuine nonsense? Why are so many people irritated by it? Why is it so easy to reclaim nonsense, to render it sensible, if only we make half an effort? Why is it so difficult to invent nonsense, as distinct from stumbling on it, or into it? Nonsense represents, in a broader and less mystified form, the freedom from meaning that the Surrealists sought in automatic writing, and it is similarly elusive, and similarly short-lived. Lautreaumont's "Nothing is incomprehensible" is not opposed to Eluard's assertion; it merely marks a later stage in the game of meaning.

There is a moment in Alice in Wonderland where the Mock-Turtle remembers his schooldays, and in particular a teacher who taught Reeling and ~~Writing~~ Writhing (along with Ambition, Distraction, Uglification and Derision). There is a flash of nonsense here: only sounds and the alphabet connect reeling and writing with reading and writing. But the flash ends, the words return rapidly to sense, because reeling and writing are what a turtle (even a mock-turtle) might well need to leanr, add more significantly, because reeling and writhing are taught in plenty of human schools, and were inculcated with especial success in England in the nineteenth century. The return to meaning is important, part of the power of the joke. But the brief absence from meaning is important too - without the absence there could be no return.

An Andalusian Dog is made up of such absences and returns, the

difference being that in Lewis Carroll the returns are authoritative, unforgettable, full of magnificent undertow, while in the film the absences are what count, the returns belonging mainly to a fairly ordinary lexicon of repression.

A number of the movie's absences have to do specifically with the cinema, arex absences from the forms of meaning films usually have. By 1929 movies had a fully articulated syntax and Bunuel was interested in conscripting it too for nonsense. It is true, as critics have often said, that An Andalusian Dog is not an avant-garde or experimental film; does not, apart from a bit of slow motion and some dabbling with an iris, tinker with technique. But it is because the work is convetional that its questioning of convention is so interesting.

What makes us think, for example, that space in a movie is continuous and substantial? We see a woman looking out of a window and assume that the street in the subsequent shot is what she is looking at. Movie space is imagined or calculated. If a person leaves a room, we picture him arriving in another room, or a corridor; not in the next frame of film or off the set entirely; or, as happens in An Andalusian Dog, in the same room, or on a beach. Thes gags here concern not philosophers' space but moviemakers' space, the fabricated world we keep judging by the rules of the given world itself; as if it was an imitation, and not a construction.

Similarly, the opening sequence of the film shows us a man, a pair of hands, a razor, a young woman, an eye, the moon, another (animal) eye.

As David Thomson says, "We readily construct a spatial and temporal continuum for these separate elements so that the film becomes a story in which one man (he) carries out this odd assault on one woman (she). They are all in the same place (there)..." Only our suppositions convert sequence into narrative. "The man sharpens the razor and then he cuts the woman's eye." Film has no and, still less an and then, and in this case no possessive apostrophe. Films, like dreams, replace grammarr and causality by simple succession:, then, then, then, then. We invent the missing syntax, supply all the connectives - or rather we invent and supply a good deal more than we usually recognize. There is nothing odd about this, I'm not suggesting that the opening sequence of An Andalusian Dog does not tell a story. This is just the way we see films, but for that reason it will bear thinking about. We work at seeing movies, make them resemble a narrative in language, and to speak of "reading" them, as if becoming the fashion, is to blur an important difference.

The same point can be made with paintings, or photographs. There is a picture by Magrittte, called Castle in the Pyrenees, which shows a huge rock suspended in mid-air over a mild sea; there is a castle poised on top of the rock. Only "suspended in mid-air" is already an interpretation. Perhaps the rock is moving. Alain Robbe-Grillet thinks it is falling, but that is to introduce the story of gravity into the painting, a borrowing from our world. The rock could be travelling from left to right, or from right to left, or even upwards, or towards or away from us. Now in a film we would see it travelling,

but would have to interpret the relation of this shot to the next, once again importing connected narrative into a storyless universe. If it is true, as Roland Barthes says, that every image is a narrative, this is because we can't resist or do without narrative, because we can't leave imagesx alone. Not that we should; but it will be as well to know how large our collaboration in these matters is.

Finally, in An Andalusian Dog Bunuel plays with the idea that a film frame always excludes something; or rather seems to ~~mx~~ exclude a world that prolongs the scene that is viewed. We can get very anxious about what we are not seeing in a movie, even when we know there is nothing there, or only cables and boxes and arc-lamps, what Jacques Derrida might call le hors-film. We think we are missing a piece of the heroes' universe, that a shift of the camera will reveal thex whole truth, the absent clue, what is hidden. When the protagonist of An Andalusian Dog picks up the two ends of rope, the film makes a kind of implicit promise that it will let us know where the ropes lead; that is what films do, part of their decorum. But when that extraordinary double bundle of things appears, we are being shown not only the past of the character, as Bunuel's correspondants thought, but a certain provocative possibility of the cinema. This is a film. What is beyond the frame, what can be dragged into sight, may literally be anything.

In spite of all its high and low jinks, An Andalusian Dog does tell a story. It is the story of countless other films, including The Golden Age. A couple meet, are separated, meet again, the woman goes off with another man. We may remember Cyril Connolly's claim about romantic love: "the heart is made to be broken, and after it has mended, to be broken again." The man's heart, that is. A woman's heart is less constant and more resilient. This ridiculous old myth was still going stron in Joyce's Ulysses, published some seven years before An Andalusian Dog appeared, and it informs Bunuel'sx last film, That Obscure Object of Desire, as thoroughly as his first. We should take it, I think, less as a vision of supposed feminine fact than ad a portrait of felt masculine fear, a nightmare of impending treason.

The Golden Age, like the earlier work, has plenty of random happening and narrative disturbance. A large cow sits on a bed in a well-to-do house,and is casually shooed away as if it were a dog; a smartly dressed gentleman walks thoughtfully down a street, kicking a violin as he goes. A minister commits suicide and falls upwards out of his shoes to lie on the ceiling. And again there is the wonderfully disconnected use ot title cards. A card says, 'Sometimes on Sunday', for example, and the following shot shows a whole side of a street collapsing into rubble. Another card announces the founding of Rome (in 1930, on a rocky shore), and we see shots of St Peter's, a Vatican balcony, and what purports to be a French window in the same building with a note stuck to it: "I've spoken to the landlord; he's letting us have the lease on very favourable terms..."

But the narrative line here, finally, is stronger than in An Andalusian Dog; the same story more firmly told, and with ampler social and historical implications. Two lovers interrupt the founding of Rome with their squeals of pleasure as they grovel together in a nearby patch of mud, and they are separated by a pair of plain clothes men. Sex literally has to be stopped so that social life can start. It is as if Buster Keaton, who Bunuel once said could give lessons to reality, had decided to make a film of Civilization and its Discontents. Later in the movie, when the man and the woman, across various obstacles, have got together again, they are disturbed by a noisy concert, and the woman leaves with the conductor of the orchestra. Culture strikes again, and the film at last abandons all pretence of randomness and concludes with a powerfully concentrated set of associations. The man, alone, in a rage, tears up a pair of pillows and finds his hands full of feathers which he seems to have borrowed from Breton's Nadja. He pitches various objects out of a window - a plough, a burning fir tree, a large wooden giraffe, a live archbishop (who gets up and scurries away), and more and more feathers. A ℟ card then tells us:

> At the precise moment when these feathers, torn out by his furious hands, covered the ground below the window, at this moment, we said, but very far away, the survivors of the Chateau de Selliny were coming out, to go back to Paris...

Selliny, called Seligny on another card, is a misspelling of Silling, the high castle in the Black Forest where the orgies of Sade's 120 Days of Sodom take place. There follows the scene I have already described, with the Christlike Blangis and the youthful remnant of the orgy. The film ends of an image of a snow-covered cross hung with female scalps, a jolly paso doble frolicking in the sound track.

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It is true that all this resists logical organization, and there is much clumsiness, both in the conception and in the execution of these scenes. But the clustering of thoughts is eloquent enough: rage, betrayal, sadism, Christianity, murder, sex, saintliness, much else. This is precisely the world of Benjamin's "unholy coupling", the realm of noble promises and ugly deeds, the domain of deception and displacement the Surrealists sought to explode.

At the beginning of the film, the scorpions make way for a lonely bandit keeping watch. He is startled to see four archbishops, mitred and fully robed, planted on his rocky coast. They sit on a rugged, steeply shelving cliff, montonously chanting, making vague ritual gestures. The bandit reports this to his comrades, saying "The Majorcans are here". The bandits, however, are a strangely depleted lot, sick and dying, and setting out to defend themselves, pass out along the way. All except their leader, who gets another glimpse of the archbishops, who have now turned to skeletons, but remain ink the same spot, one of them wearing his mitre at a particularly jaunty angle. Immediately a flotilla of small boats arrives, full of clerics, soldiers, nuns, civiliand, all in modern dress. They have come to commemorate the deaths of the archbishops, and to build in this place the imperial city of Rome. This is the inauguration ceremony which the lovers disturb with the screams of sex. Later in the film the guests at a grand reception given by the Marquid of X in the environs of a fully constructed Rome are also called the Majorcans.

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The Majorcans, then, are people who arrive, convoys of respectability. The bandits suggest some raw, fading stage of civilization prior to the hegemony of church and state. None of this is difficult, or enormously interesting. The sequence showing the bandits' response the archbishops' arrival is slowx and drawn-out, a marked let-down after those implacable scorpions. What is striking is the sight of those archbishops on the rocks, the crazy juxtaposition of pomp and barrenness. We seem to witness the instant birth of high andx complicated culture, the appearance not of faith but of hierarchy and circumstance. The rapidity with which the rites are delegated to mortuary remains implies, I think, not the death of culture but a sense that culture is death. More important, perhaps, the four archbishops announce the four scoundrels who leave Sade's castle at the end of the movie, and so an equation is set up not only between Blangis and Christ but between the Chruch and organized debauchery. Unholy coupling.

What has all this to do with romantic love, since love is just what is lost? Love is in the world to make us forget the world, Eluard wrote, and a whole train of interpretations of The Golden Age has taken this line. Breton called the film "a unique exaltation of total love", and Dali said that his intention in writing the movie with Bunuel was to present the pure pursuit of love xxx "amid ignoble patriotic and humanitarian ideals, and other miserable mechanisms of reality." Bunuel himself wrote that it was "a romantic film performed in full Surrealist frenzy".

Certainly The Golden Age constantly sets love against society,

right from the moment when sex troubles the founding of the city. The man is so edgy in his passion that he later slaps the woman's mother on the face because she has spilled a couple of drops of drink on him. The lovers communicate telepathically, and with rolling eyes, bitten lips, clenched hands, mime all the sicknesses of starved impulse. In the film's most famous image the heroine looks into her mirror and sees neither herself nor her room but an open sky, wind drivingk the hurrying clouds. A gust fromk the mirror ruffles her hair, her face expresses a melting desire which neither words nor a atill can catch. It is hard to think of a more eloquent picture of what the longing of love feels like.

Bunuel subscribes, like a good Surrealist, to the doctrine of all-consuming passion, sees love as "the great,irresistible summons, as an early Surrealist text put it. But he cannot present love as a pure unworldly force in a grubby universe. He can present the grubby universe all right, and does so with relish. The Golden Age tramples joyously on all kinds of pieties about dogs, children and the infirm. But Bunuel does not see the self as innocent, separate fromk the world, happy if left alone. His lovers sacrifice eveything to love, the man abandons a diplomatic mission, causing untold suffering and death, evoked in a quick series of shots of desperate crowds which appear to have galloped out of Griffith's Intolerance or Gance's Napoleon, and is outraged when the minister calls to tell him about the catastrophe, catching him in the paroxysms of his passion. "You're bothering me for a thing like that?" he shouts, in the funniest and most memorable line in the movie. It is at

this point that the minister commits suicide and is found lying on the ceiling.

And yet this love is an endlessly interrupted obsession. When the lovers are not divided by society, they manage to distract themselves, crack their heads together, fall off chairs, become frightened, lose the track of their desire. The man, fumbling and clumsy with passion, suddenly becomes interested in the foot of a nearby statue. He hushes the woman with a gesture of impatience, as if she were a child getting inhis way, and stares fixedly at the stone foot, which at this moment matters more than his love, which in turn matters more than the world.

They bite each other's fingers furiously, and a brief, macabre, passing shot shows a fingerless hand.

The foot returns to prâminence while the man is talking to the minister on the telephone. The woman, ~~fainting with~~ frustrated, begins to suck the statue's toe, first abstractedly and then with rising emotion. The camera ~~xxxfx~~ shifts without warning to the statue's cold, classical face, its unseeing eyes entirely indifferent to the human turmoil at its base. The shot ~~xxxxxxx~~ makes us laugh, but ~~implies~~ distress. It is a banana peel for love, and a grim image of what love all too often amounts to: abjection on one side and frost on the other.

A Surrealist questionnaire sent out at the end of 1929 asked, "Do you believe in the victory of admirable love over sordid life or of sordid life over admirable love?" Hardly a neutral question. Most of the respondants tried to fiddle with the terms a bit but came down firmly on the side of admirable love. Dumuel, who had

answered a series of other questions scrupulously and in detail, simply said, "I don't know." He doesn't know who wins the battle, he only knows that the battle is dire; that the heart, while perhaps not made tok be broken, is brokenx xxm all the time, and not by an elementary exeternal ogre named society,but by its own complicity with its encroaching enemies. In this context the woman's infidelity, apart fromk being a lapse into that hoary old myth, is prkxpx perhaps a sign of the reality principle, the way things are when the romance and the rhetoric die down.

The jokes about movie space in An Andalusian Dog are echoed in The Golden Age by a series of impressive jokes about movie time. The four archbishops arrive without warning, or apparent means of transport; they die and turn to skeletons while the bandit is telling his pals about them. At this point they are already a memory for their compatriots, martyrs for the future city. And as a last disconcerting touch Rome is not only founded on a rocky coast by a collection of people in twentieth century dress, it is explicity said to be founded with unaccountable lateness: in 1930, the date of the film.

Film narrative specializes in the present tense, but so does any performance, as performance. Whatever you read about happens, in one clear sense, now. Bunuel shifts the emphasis from the receding perspectives of imagined history to the current moment, the now of movie house. And facing that now, of course, is not mortal, consecutive duration but the concocted time of film, with all those gaps we ordinarily fill with dreams of natural process, the time such things

would take. Our capacity to naturalize the weird territory of film is almost unlimited. Bunuel doesn't want to protest against this fact; on the contrary, his movies rely on it. But he does want to give our craving for comfortable illusion a hard ride; to test our cinematic innocence. Bunuel's films don't refer to themselves in any complicated, self-conscious way. They merely make obvious, with a brusque and impatient wit, that films are what they are.

Film, Bunuel once wrote, is a "victim of time", meaning that nothing dates faster than a photographed world, and that only a developed language of cinema will save its products from "harmful senescence". What this suggests, in the context of The Golden Age, is that Imperial Rome will have to be invented and can be anywhere, but that it is 1930, whatever contortions of disguise you go in for - just as Bonnie and Clyde, say, belongs unmistakably to 1967, and not to the period of Bonnie and Clyde. Film is merciless in this respect, will not tolerate the past, or the future, always betrays the presence of the present. The snag is that that present becomes the past before you know it, and Bunuel's solution, as early as The Golden Age and as late as The Phantom of Liberty, is to confess all this, and juggle with it, to cure the infirmities of film with film's possibilities. This is the opposite of time-travel. It is because we and the movie are ineradicably here and now that these games are amusing, pictures of a freedom which their very form denies; it is because the movies are movies that the games can be played at all.

Bunuel's next film, a documentary, Land Without Bread, looks like a new direction. Had he abandoned Surrealism completely, as Tony Richardson suggests? We don't have to jump to conclusions - neither to Richardson's nor to Ado Kyrou's, who insists that Land Without Bread "in no way differs from The Golden Age": "its realism is the same, and therefore its surrealism too."

There was a documentary streak to the movement, which set up a Bureau of Psychological Research, and the attraction of automatic writing was that it offered a means of discovery, not a mode of invention. But none of these efforts got very far, and by 1932 Bunuel was beginning to separate himself from the Surrealist group, while remaining on friendly terms with its individual members. "I was beginning not to agree," he wrote, "with that kind of intellectual aristocracy, with its artistic and moral extremes, which isolated us from the world and limited us to our own company."

Surrealism had a last lesson for Bunuel, though, more radical and more enduring than anything I have indicated so far, and in this further sense it does inform Land Without Bread, and indeed all of Bunuel's subsequent films. A lifelong Surrealist after all? Let's see.

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A Note on films notdiscussed in the text

Bunuel's other films are fairly forgettable, but I offer the following brief comments because there are flickers of life in these slender ~~or silly~~ works and because their faults, when they do not arise simply from a lack of material resources, form a limit or horizon: where Bunuel's world ends. He is not a sort of liberal, for example, and he cannot make a genre like melodrama work for him instead of against him. In spite of what critics have repeatedly said on this subject, what he can do is ruin a genre so directly that many people will not even notice.

Grand Casino is a musical, and Bunuel's first Mexican film. Two glittering stars of the Latin American screen, the motherly Libertad Lamarque and the portly Jorge Negrete, sing away at each other in an improbable story about skullduggeries over a Mexican oil well - perhaps current affairs willl bring about a revival. Whenever Negrete sings a trio with guitars, entirely unprovided for by the plot, joins him as his backing. Negrete shows only faint surprise when they show up in a jail, or in an adjoining room, but when he leaps onto a stage to escape the bad guys, sings a chorus of a song called 'La Nortena', 'The Girl from the North', and then catches sight of the trio grinning in the

balcony, even he seems a little taken aback, and lifts his hat to them in an elegant acknowledgement of their improbable, but undeniable presence. There are other nice gags in this film: a love scene played straight by the principals while the camera lingers resolutely on a sickening-looking patch of oily mud; an insistence on showing Lamarque in extravagant close-ups and soft focus, so that she looks like a movie-star in a museum, a stray from Sunset Boulevard.

Bunuel's second Mexican film was The Great Rake, an easy-going, even sluggish comedy about a rich layabout whose family - two brothers, son, daughter, sister-in-law - feigns poverty to get him to mend his ways. The old rascal tumbles the plot, though, and tells them that he, and they, are really ruined. There is a nice moment when the daughter, confronted with this second level of deception, which she takes to be the new truth, says, "We must face reality". Round about here the story interest shifts to the daughter, who is in love with a poor man but engaged to a well-off young schemer. She gets as far as the altar when her father decides he does know an impediment to this marriage - the girl loves someone else - and the daughter, willing to be sacrificed but delighted to be freed, races down the aisle and up the street after her poor young man, high heels and wedding dress flaking and flapping, a tiny bit of middle-class surrealism. The family, all got up in morning suits and the rest, march cheerfully after her, abreast in the middle of the road - not, I think, an anticipation of the discreetly charming bourgeois repeatedly seen on a French country lane, but a shot which has some of the same savour: respectability

exposed, looking both solid and ridiculous, as I have suggested manners always do in Bunuel. A faint bitterness hangs over the film. With the exception of the daughter's young man and his family, these are all rich folks playing at being poor. There are those who are not playing, and Bunuel's next work was The Young and the Damned.

The principal actor in The Great Rake is the paunchy, middle-aged Fernando Soler, who reappears in central roles in Susana and Daughter of Deceit. He is something of a ham, as Bunuel says, using the English word, but he has presence, and can carry a film in a way that many of Bunuel's Mexican actors can't. Daughter of Deceit - I have already discussed Susana - is a remake of one of the films Bunuel produced in Madrid in the 1930s. It has extraordinarily tacky sets, and knockabout performances by a pair of comedians who make Abbott and Costello look like Shakespeare. The story concerns a man who abandons his baby daughter, thinking she is the fruit of his wife's infidelities, only to discover that she is his own child. Whatever interest the film has gathers round the man's dogged misanthropy - the Spanish film and the play it was based on were called Don Quintin el Amargao, the embittered Don Quintin. At the end, reunited with his grownup daughter and promised a grandson, Don Quintin learns that the child is not born yet. He leers into the camera and speaks directly to the audience, a low-spirited Groucho Marx: "You see, nothing turns out right for me." There is a dignity in his refusal to forgive his faithless wife on her deathbed - the priest will forgive you because it's his job, he says, and God

will forgive you because He can, but I won't, because I can't - but what we note mainly is the egoism even in the suffering, the sense of a man who has simplified his life by a mean belief, given himself over to the cynicism ~~xxxxx~~ which tempts many of Buñuel's characters, but catches few of them.

The highpoint of Mexican Bus Ride is a dream in which the hero sees his dumpy new wife replaced by the local vamp, rising out of a river in a sort of Ophelia rig. Hero and vamp then find themselves in a rattling and shaking bus which has no driver but is full of tropical plants and trees, and/a few assorted goats and sheep. A carries seemingly interminable apple peal leads out of the hero's mouth and out of the bus up to his mother on a pedestal, smiling as she shaves the spiralling skin off the fruit. Viridiana, some ten years later, peals an apple in the same way for Don Jaime. The plot of the film is a pretext for an undreamed bus ride from and back to a small village on the Pacific, and the bus is a world, one of those closed communities which recur in Buñuel's films. A child is born on it, a coffin transported; and the whole excursion is framed by marriagex and death. In spite of wobbly back projection, cardboard mountains and terrible acting, this film has quite a bit of charm, and is one of the lightest of Buñuel's movies. Only the dream really stays in the mind, though, with its glimpse of a realm where contraries are cancelled, and Oedipus just holds his mum's hand.

A Woman without Love tells the story of a mother's sin and of an older brother's envy of his cadet, mixing the theme of the prodigal

son with that of the skeleton in the cupboard. There is a moment when the envious son, temporarily pacified, waltzes with his mother, the pair of them occupying the whole floor and the whole frame, the camera eagerly, fluently following: another version of Oedipus in Wonderland. But there is very little else. Bunuel's direction here is really perfunctory, and the film's music, by Raul Lavista, id as swampy as any I've ever heard.

The Brute opens with a strong situation, expertly displayed. The inhabitants of a tenement are threatened with eviction, and one of them is roughed up and killed. The central figure is the Brute himself, a huge, slow-minded, tender-hearted man who works in an abattoir and falls in love with the daughter of the man he has (accidentally) done in. Even so spare a summary suggests, I think, something of the film's slither from the class struggle to a galloping sentimentality. There are haunting images in this movie - a strangled hen, a perched rooster which recalls the ominous, unexpected cockerel in The Young and the Damned - and there is a fine sultry performance by Katy Jurado as the temptress and betrayer of the Brute. But it is a disappointing film; more ambitious than many of Bunuel's Mexican works, but for that reason more evasive in its ready-made ironies. Even the abattoir seems a little too easy an icon; and the sides of beef flung about there don't have the surprise and menace of the meat carted onto a tram in the film I shall describe in a moment. The shadow of pauperdom lurked behind the clumsy japes of The Great Rake. Here a plausible-looking

poverty is drowned in melodrama.



Illusion Takes a Tram returns us to the closed community of Mexican Bus Ride, and there are a number of visual echoes of the earlier film. The driver andx conductor of a tram get drunk and borrow their vehicle for a night. They then find they can't return it to the depot in broad daylight without being caught, so they drive it around all day, trying to look unobstrusive and running into various adventures. The film has more of the flavour of Mexico City than any of Bunuel's works except The Young and the Damned. We see an empty, darkeningx street, for example, and the shrill, plaintive whistle of a vendor of fried bananas fills the shot with an identifiable atmosphere. I have already mentioned the film's most striking sequence. The tram on its illicit run stops at the abattoir, and a crew of slaughterers and their assistants get on,carrying hunks and sides of meat, which they hang up inside the car. A pig's head sways with the vehicle movement, tilting the top hat of a bewildered, drunken toff, who has also somehow got aboard. The trax stops for a couple of women who are carrying a clumsily wrapped bundle, and the deep joke of this episode comes to thex surface. The bundle turns out to be a carving a bloodstained Christ: meat too in it way, or an imitation of meat; tortured flesh, lamb of God.

Bunuel himself said in an interview that he hates the "educative pretensions" of Death and the River. The film is a Mexican Western, full of shoot-outs and revenge, but animated by a heartless liberalism which simply and flatly condemnsx all this violence (unlike

its appeal) in the name of progress and science. Mexico City and the hero, who survives a spell in an iron lung to become a doctor himself, are set against the provinces and the feuding families to be found there; saving life against wasting it. The film makes no serious distinction between killing in self-defence and murder provoked by rancour; indeed makes no distinction between a rancour which is generations old and constantly fed by new aggressions, and the casual, apparently unmotivated violence of excitable people: the Montagues, Capulets and Gary Gilmore all thrown into one basket. Mexico: a country blurred by randomness, where they bump each other off at the drop of a sombrero. It is not that the movie is "clearly intended for the Mexicans", as Aranda says. It is aimed at the Mexicans, a curiously sneering view. Of course Mexico is a violent place, in its rather introverted way, and the movie does have an eloquent sense of the horror of the feud, of the ugly stubbornness of all such narrow fidelities to hatred; but nothing substantial is opposed to this horror, and the hollowness and abstraction of the supposedly progressive world make one hanker for the humanity of revenge, stunted and cruel as it is.