

looked for there. Others habitually create a dynamic which causes us to search continually from screen left to screen right.

An interesting example of direction of screen composition which creates a tension between an interest in the center of the screen, balanced with a subliminal dread of what is happening off screen is to be found in Luis Bunuel's Los Olvidados.

The basic structure of the film is created around the gang-mentality of a group of very poor young Mexican boys. A mentality of gang-ritual predominates, with a constant atmosphere of something-being-done, ~~and~~ the concerted attention of the gang <sup>is</sup> ~~being~~ directed toward that something. The film is ~~predominately~~ composed photographically so that the audience shares in that gang-like concentration of interest (on something which is occurring generally at screen center.)

As usual with gang rituals, the something being done is an act of very mixed moral significance. It leads to some recognition of power or prestige for one of the members, but is in clear opposition to the needs of others *in the community*

While the audience increasingly shares in the ritualized performance of these acts, looking screen center at the stealing of milk from a donkey, the theft of a knife, the gang's attack and robbery of an old man, a murder of a young man, a spying on a young girl as she washes her legs in milk, etc., the audience shares increasingly in the sense of guilt which pervades the area outside the influence



of the gang, (and just beyond the frame of the screen.)

One is continually forced to wonder, for example, why no one in the community goes to the simple trouble of watching the gang and identifying their activities. It then becomes clear that the director has drawn us into one of the gang's major preoccupations: that of living out their lives in the midst of the community, in clear sight of all, but moving quickly enough, and maintaining sufficient bravado, to prevent people from actually doing anything about them.

Also, another dynamic begins to become clear.

The predominate figure is a person of very mixed moral significance, (early in the film he murders a friend, and continually prevents another friend from developing a better way of life. But he remains indisputably the one person who holds the gang together, and who gives the individuals their purpose and meaning.) He occupies the center of the screen -- and he continually menaces the <sup>sp</sup> periphery of the screen much as he does the mentalities of the gang members.

The realization of this visual duality in his character is accomplished as follows. The occupation of the center of the screen is simply handled. Taking advantage of the gang-leader's ("Jaibo's") proclivity to seize the ritualistic center of interest, there is no problem in

handled in a relatively straightforward a simple manner?



establishing his predominance of the center screen.

An habitual interest in the center of the screen is increased by the photographic composition. Arms, hands, fence rails, chairs, directions of motion, eye-direction, shadows, all conspire to create visual lines of force, leading us toward the center. The lighting and set-design is such that the farm-yard, the stable, the farm-house, the village streets, the shops, all take on a depth, a richness of detail and of contour. This serves to draw us further into the scene.

One of the major problems of the film was a need to somehow compensate for some dramatically crucial, but improbably sudden appearances of Jaibo, <sup>he</sup> who must also be presented in such a way that he gains an increasing subliminal threat to the good intentions and integrity of every person in the film. This is accomplished both dramatically and visually.

*Subliminal =  
in a way of  
which the  
spectator is  
unaware?*

The visual aspect of the accomplishment is what most interests us here. During two key scenes, Jaibo must suddenly, just when we most wish <sup>✓</sup> that he would not appear, invade the screen. In one instance, he appears, leaning against a corner of a building, and is brought into the scene by a tracking movement of the camera. In another, he invades from the upper border of the screen; and the shot is designed to reveal him lying along the line just above the line of sight in the previous composition.



(the preceding shot is composed to show only the bottom of the second "story" of a crude stable, and the following composition reveals him waiting there, hidden in some hay, waiting to kill his friend.

We are prepared throughout the film for these two crucial <sup>revelations!</sup> reveals. First, we are prepared dramatically for them, in the recognition that each of the major characters normally "waits" for Jaibo, as though only he can restore events to their "normal" on-going patterns. Second, the visual lines of all the compositions --the barn-yards, the roads, the plazas, the village shops, all have a linear unity about them. The lines and patterns seem to hold together, and the postures and dress of the persons in the shots seem to be appropriate for their surroundings. Not so with Jaibo. The lines of his body never seem to be of the same composition as the lines of the bodies of those around him. His clothes are too loose, and ill-fitted. The lines of his shoulders are never quite balanced with the lines of the rest of his body. At the same time, the lines of his body jar the powerful compositions of the structures and objects around him. He never fits into a scene, visually, when he is in it. Therefore the relief of visual composition in scenes which he is not in, creates in us a sense of sub-liminal unease; a sense that something is wrong, because things have somehow become too right.



Thirdly, and this is the aspect of the composition which is pertinent to the viewing situation of the audience, he is caused to invade the screen at extremely improbable, but dramatically justifiable times, during the crucial formative periods of the film. At one time, during a dream in which a boy suffers the agony of rejection and grotesque reacceptance by his mother, Jaibo appears, starkly lit and moving in phantom-like slow-motion, from under the bed. At another time, while a young and rather innocent girl erotically washes her legs with the milk from a donkey (believing it will make her skin look fresh) he appears unexpectedly from his hiding-place on the upper story of the stable.

*excellent*

In both these instances, he appears not only at a very unexpected time, but from a very unexpected direction, and in a menacingly casual, horizontal, laughing posture. The first appearance in the dream is made from the bottom of the screen, ~~and~~ the pull-back of the camera reveals him there, as if he had been there forever, lying and listening to the agonies of the dream in progress above him. In the second instance, he is found lying, looking down mockingly, from a horizontal position just above the cut-off line of the screen.

The focus of attention, throughout, is on the center of the screen, and the ritualistic gang-atmosphere of the drama conditions us to believe that here, in the center of the attention, the forces of good and evil can be controlled, but outside menaces the unexpected. In each instance,



the menace appears as a result of a nearly fortuitous action, a development of the drama, a search for security, an attempt to find a way out of one's wretchedness, a experimental quest of beauty. The camera follows the natural motivations of the scene and discovers him there, suddenly invading the entire border of the screen, as if he had been there from all time, watching and waiting.

IN such a film, the spectator finds that the clear, strong vertical and horizontal lines are no longer borders between the active and inactive realms of his consciousness. the meanings have become reversed, and the stronger anxieties are identified sub-liminally with the penumbra around the screen, instead of with the screen itself. This is accomplished, as indicated above, while the conscious watching habits are directed consistently and clearly toward the clearly understandable action at the center of the screen.

It should be pointed out too, that the audiences anxieties concerning the realities just beyond the borders of the screen is never pandered to, in an obvious style, as it would be in a typical well-made film. The lines of sight, the directions of action, the graphic compositions are all clearly directed to form a conscious force which controls our "normal" consciousness to expect a predictable development of events. (developed at screen center) The anxieties of our consciousness though, become increasingly preoccupied with the dark areas, <sup>just</sup> beyond the borders of the screen.