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The Road and the Room

Narrative Drive in the Films of Luis Buñuel

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On the Road and in the Room

One of the most mysterious images in Buñuel's cinema is the recurring scene in *Le Charme discret de la bourgeoisie* (The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie, 1972) where the ensemble of six main characters walk down a desolate country road leading nowhere, a sequence that is not rooted in any specific time or place and in no way contributes to the plot. The repetition of this sequence, with subtle variations, encourages us to look for related recurring road scenes in his other films – like the long-shot of a horse-drawn carriage on a tree-lined road in the erotic fantasy that opens *Belle de jour* (1967) and later provides entry into other masochistic daydreams; or the montage of traffic scenes (from busy freeways to French country lanes) that launches the heretical pilgrimage to Spain in the opening of *La Voie lactée* (The Milky Way, 1969); or a bourgeois gentleman buying a first-class train ticket between France and Spain at the opening of *Cet obscur objet du désir* (That Obscure Object of Desire, 1977), a trip he repeats during the film. These repetitions make us wonder how such road imagery, narrative vehicles, and restless movements function in Buñuel's cinema, during all phases of his career. While these patterns draw on Spain's tradition of picaresque fiction, they also address Buñuel's experience of exile. Perhaps most interestingly, they generate open-ended database narratives that expose the combined processes of selection and combination of modular story elements from an underlying database, a form that anticipated what was to come in future decades (Kinder, 2002).

Equally mysterious and pivotal to Buñuel's cinema is the narrative situation at the heart of *El ángel exterminador* (The Exterminating Angel, 1962), Buñuel's first

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film in Mexico on which he had total artistic control. An ensemble of bourgeois guests find themselves trapped in a luxurious drawing room following a night at a concert of classical music and an elegant late supper. Despite several attempts to leave, they are unable to cross the threshold, as if trapped by their own existential failure of will in a hellish Sartrian social space from which there is no exit. Entrapment within a bourgeois household also occurs in Buñuel's two features made in Spain, where the primary danger is sexual violation: earlier in *Viridiana* (1961), where the entrapment is also associated with an elegant meal that parodies Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, and later in *Tristana* (1970) without the benefit of the banquet. Yet, this situation is treated with the greatest abstraction, theatricality, and absurdity in *El ángel exterminador*, partly because, as in *Le Charme discret de la bourgeoisie*, the focus is on the ensemble rather than an individual protagonist.

The repetition of the road and the room exposes a paradox at the core of Buñuel's narrative experimentation. Instead of functioning as a binary, both tropes provide alternative versions of narrative entrapment, confirming that liberty is a phantom. Like the forked path in *Tristana*, these two tropes seem to offer a choice, but whether the protagonist follows the *road* that leads to a mad dog shot in the street or discovers a *room* where she finds a new lover, neither can make her forget or elude the guardian who molested her. The interplay between the road and the room cultivated a reliance on both narrative expansion and compression, enabling Buñuel to leverage the dialogic effect they had on each other. Like Jonathan Swift's reliance on giants and pygmies in *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) as alternative perspectives for exposing the limitations of its nomadic protagonist, this strategy proved effective for Buñuel's use of satire.

In *El ángel exterminador*, one of the trapped characters irrationally concludes that repetition can somehow free them from their prison. Claiming that all of them are arranged in precisely the same pattern that they were in at the moment they first experienced this failure of will (even though some characters have died), she uses this ritual to drive their escape from the mansion. Yet the entrapment is soon repeated on a larger scale as they become similarly confined in the cathedral where they give thanks for their alleged emancipation. Their spatial confinement is intensified not only on the macro level in the spiritual realm of the church, but also on the micro level in the closets within the parlor, which are appropriated for bodily functions – excretion, sex, and death. The film shows how spatial confinement is reinforced both by expansion and compression, both by religion and *l'amour fou* (mad love), which, despite their respective promises and charms, provide no escape from our animal nature and mortality.

The interweaving of these two narrative tropes (the road and the room) is most apparent in *Le Charme discret de la bourgeoisie*, which is structured by the recurrence of both (Figures 21.1 and 21.2). The abstract road scene is repeated three times, creating borders that impose an arbitrary order, like hedges planted in a wild garden. Although the road appears to be totally open-ended, the repetition of these scenes creates an almost classical structure, as if dividing the episodic narrative into three

Figure 21.1 The road in *Le Charme discret de la bourgeoisie*. Dean Film, Greenwich Film Productions, and Medus Produzione.

Figure 21.2 The room in *Le Charme discret de la bourgeoisie*. Dean Film, Greenwich Film Productions, and Medusa Produzione.

parallel acts and providing a sense of closure. This repetition also reassures us that, despite all misfortunes that befall our charming traffickers (including imprisonment and death), they resiliently bounce back like toons. The abstraction evokes picaresque fiction, yet here we have not a singular lower-class rogue but an ensemble of corrupt bourgeois conspirators whose survival may not be so reassuring.

In addition to the recurring images of the road, the film also presents a recurring series of bourgeois dinner parties in enclosed rooms, which build on the banquets from *Viridiana* and *El ángel exterminador*. But here they are marked by absurd anomalies (e.g., a tearoom that runs out of coffee, tea, and milk, or a restaurant that doubles as funeral parlor) and are repeatedly interrupted by sex, death, and dreams. Their theatricality is underscored when one of the dinner parties takes place on stage, a variation that turns out to be a nightmare. Rooted in our animal need to eat on a daily basis, the dinner party has become a familiar ritual in bourgeois culture. Buñuel claims the film is about repetition – that's why the emphasis is on eating and dreaming, the two daily activities we share with other animals but still consider uniquely human. Buñuel shows us how the repetition of these four activities (like the recurring aimless stroll) imposes narrative structure on our lives – whether it is the daily routines of eating and dreaming, or sex and death that bookend our lives.

This essay explores the interplay between the road and the room in Buñuel's narrative experimentation, and the way repetition is mobilized to reveal the inherent paradoxes within these narrative tropes. Both tropes suggest connections to other narrative forms. The room is the basic structure of theatre, an idea perhaps best articulated by playwright Harold Pinter in the 1960 program notes for his play titled *The Room* (first performed in 1957):

> Given a man in a room and he will sooner or later receive a visitor. ... If two people inhabit the room the visitor will not be the same man for both. ... A man in a room and no one entering lives in expectation of a visit ... But however much it is expected, the entrance, when it comes, is unexpected and almost always unwelcome.

The road is the driving force of the epic, the novel, the road movie, and all other forms of picaresque fiction. Accentuating the contrast between theatre and epic and their respective pleasures, Aristotle preferred the emotional intensity generated by tragedy's unities of structure over the expansiveness of the epic's mixed form. This preference was fundamental to his hierarchy of genres, yet Spain's Golden Age literature excelled in both forms. Preferring paradoxical dialectics over frozen hierarchies, Buñuel adapted both literary forms to cinema, leveraging the distinctions between them, particularly as described by French film theorist André Bazin (1951).

> There can be no theater without architecture. ... Whatever it is, the décor constitutes the walls of this three-sided box opening into the auditorium which we call the stage. ... Because it is only part of the architecture of the stage, the décor of the theatre is thus an area materially enclosed, limited, circumscribed. ... It is not the same with

> cinema, the basic principle of which is a denial of any frontiers to action. ... There can be no cinema without the setting up of an open space in place of the universe rather than as part of it ...; the cinematographic image can be emptied of all reality save one – the reality of space. (1951: 104–106)

This comparison evokes the radical differences between Buñuel's two earliest films: the theatricality of spatial confinement in *Un chien andalou* (An Andalusian Dog, 1929) versus the rambling spatial openness of *L'Âge d'or* (The Golden Age, 1930). These two lines of experimentation – with the room and the road, with the compression and expansion of narrative space – do not function as a binary. Rather, it is the dialectic interplay between them that intrigues Buñuel. For, it generates an array of diverse combinations that are not restricted to any particular cultural context (France, Spain, or Mexico), historical period (from the 1920s to the 1970s), or production regime (avant-garde, commercial industry, or European art film). They recur across his entire canon, which proved convenient for one who spent most of his life working in exile.

Buñuel's interplay between the room and the road is related to the distinction between the rhetorical tropes of metaphor (with its concentrated chain of fetishistic substitutions) and metonymy (with its endless juxtapositions), which Linda Williams (1981) used to connect his first and last pairs of films that bookend his career. She acknowledged these rhetorical figures were analogous to Freud's concepts of condensation and displacement from his dreamwork theory, which provided Buñuel with an alternative narrative infrastructure and, despite his disclaimer, a dialogic relationship with theory throughout his career. Equally resonant is the relation of these rhetorical figures to Gilles Deleuze's (1971) distinction between the masochistic and sadistic aesthetics: masochistic lovers trapped in a secret room (as in *Un chien andalou*, and *Cet obscur objet du désir*, 1977) versus the promiscuous sadist moving from one adventure to another (as in *L'Âge d'or* and *Le Fantôme de la liberté* [Phantom of Liberty, 1974]).

The Way In and the Way Out: *Un chien andalou* and *L'Âge d'or*

Buñuel's first two films, made in collaboration with surrealist painter Salvador Dalí in Paris, introduced two ways of spatializing narrative in an experimental mode. While *Un chien andalou* focuses on a pair of lovers confined within a cramped room, where eroticism is intensified by spatial restrictions, *L'Âge d'or* presents an open-ended, promiscuous, Sadean narrative that relentlessly drives forward from one location and genre to another and literally ends with the Marquis de Sade leaving an orgy.

Despite the fluidity of its dream logic, *Un chien andalou* emphasizes obstacles imposed by bourgeois culture and traditional narrative conventions, obstacles

designed to prevent gender-bending and sexual transgression. Inside the lovers' secret room, these obstacles are embodied in the cultural baggage that comically prevents the man from fulfilling his erotic desire – the piano, priests, and beasts of burden that drag him down. Like partners in the tango, the lovers perpetually struggle against each other, repeating the retaliatory moves that heighten the sexual tension between them. They are literally confined within this cramped room, which is oblivious to time – a reclusive space that may be repeatedly rewritten by narrativizing intertitles functioning as secondary revision but without being capable of change.

The film's only "road" sequences occur outside the window, when the "hero" rides up on his bicycle garbed in feminine attire and falls onto the pavement, and when the lovers watch an androgynous figure in the street below, staring at a dismembered hand and being run over by a car, actions that are all pointedly associated with castration and death. Although the room's portals – its doors and windows – lead onto an urban street scene, a lush landscape, and a breezy seascape, settings that cannot be logically reconciled with each other, these spatial contradictions become another means of locking the lovers within the secret room, as in a masochistic version of *l'amour fou* (at least according to Deleuze). It is as if all exteriors (real or imagined) inevitably lead back into this highly sexualized interior, the only place where the combative lovers are really alive. The final shot reveals them at the ocean's edge, buried to their waists in the sand, transformed into lifeless manikins devoid of genitals and unable to make love or to move. While subjectivity appears to be represented by the ongoing struggle within the interior rather than by the debilitating entrapment outside, the obstacles make mobility all the more desirable.

In contrast to this emphasis on spatial confinement, *L'Âge d'or* presents a catalogue of successive aggressive movements, from one genre or narrative field to another: territorial scorpions scurrying to kill each other in a science documentary, lethargic bandits pursuing internecine struggles in an ethnographic film, civilized Majorcans arriving by boat to confiscate the land in a colonial narrative, a captive lover being walked down urban streets as a *flâneur* in a modernist city symphony, peasants driving an oxcart through the drawing room in a class-crossed comedy of manners, bourgeois guests watching the gamekeeper shoot his disobedient son in a violent family melodrama, lovers escaping to the garden to commit sexual transgression in a perverse love story, flaming objects being thrown out of a two-storey window to express frustration in a transgressive avant-garde interlude, and sadists walking out of a castle after a violent orgy in a pornographic finale, leaving only the dead bodies and scalps of their young female victims behind. Everyone in the film refuses to get stuck in one place – unless they are dead (like the victims in the orgy). The others are always moving on to a new terrain – to new victims, new lovers, new spectators, and new technologies (the coming of sound). Deleuze (1971) associates this constant mobility with the sadistic aesthetic of Buñuel's hero, the Marquis de Sade, who freely imagined a profusion of new

violations. Distinguished from the devoted slave who manipulated the frozen world of the masochistic aesthetic (frequently within the secret room), the sadist mastered an alternative form of *l'amour fou*, in which mobility, humor, and obscenity prevailed. By the end of *L'Âge d'or*, the lovers have parted ways, the weak contenders have been subdued, and only the comic Sadean hero survives.

L'Âge d'or prefigured Buñuel's life as an exile, who moved to one foreign context after another (France, the United States, and Mexico) and had to deal with new restrictions in each culture that kept artistic liberty a phantom. Yet, this experience must have made him appreciate picaresque fiction where modular episodes are unified only by the presence of the central character, who is similarly forced to move on to the next adventure. According to historian Henry Kamen (2008), when viewed through the perspective of Spanish picaresque fiction, Spain's historical experience of recurrent exile was perceived not as "deprivation," but "an enrichment and a liberation," a dynamic that might explain why Buñuel was increasingly drawn to this form. Russian theorist M.M. Bakhtin (1981), in his writings on satire and the episodic novel, offered even stronger arguments for this perceptual shift on exile, claiming that transnational comparisons and the awareness of "alien discourses" weakens the ideological hold of any hegemonic power over language:

> Consciousness awakens to independent ideological life precisely in a world of alien discourses surrounding it, and from which it cannot initially separate itself ... This verbal-ideological decentering will occur only when a national culture loses its sealed off and self-sufficient character, when it becomes conscious of itself as only one among *other* cultures and languages. It is this knowledge that will sap the roots of a mythological feeling for language, based as it is on an absolute fusion of ideological meaning with language. (1981: 360, 369–370, emphasis in original)

It was these transnational dynamics of ideological awakening that Buñuel would dramatize both in the room and on the road.

Insiders and Outsiders: The Transnational Remix in *Las Hurdes* and *Los olvidados*

As Buñuel's first solo effort as a director and his first film made in Spain, *Las Hurdes*, aka *Tierra sin pan* (Land without Bread, 1933), brought the surrealist aesthetic home and invented the surrealistic documentary in the process. On the eve of his own exile, it is also the first film that acknowledges his own complicity with bourgeois culture. This exilic perspective helps us understand the movements in *Las Hurdes*, where a group of filmmakers travel to a desolate region of Spain to document a dismal way of life. Here the tensions exist not between a pair of lovers but between outsiders and insiders who also function as masters and slaves.

In *Las Hurdes*, the filmmakers and spectators are the ones on a journey, while the Hurdanos are stuck in a village so impoverished and confining that even smoke cannot escape from their miserable one-room dwellings. When they do try to leave, their efforts are futile – at least according to the "yes, but" rhetorical structures imposed by the outsider's voice-over narration. They go to the city to sell their wares, but return without money; they are forced to eat unripe fruit, but suffer dysentery as a consequence; their snake bites are not fatal, until they try to treat them. By the end of the film the filmmakers and spectators are eager to return to their own culture, but the film enables us to see that it is merely a larger version of the same corrupt structure that has entrapped the Hurdanos – a dynamic that would become more explicit in *El ángel exterminador* through the use of repetition.

While the filmmakers are on the road, what they discover and document is the futility of movement and the impossibility of escape, both for the insider and the outsider, the local villager and the global traveler. The filmmakers fool themselves into thinking they can make a difference, that they are not part of the exploitation. After his move to Mexico, Buñuel continued to use this interplay between the road and the room to regain world attention. Determined he would not be forgotten, in *Los olvidados* (The Forgotten Ones, aka The Young and the Damned, 1950) he uses Mexico City as an urban center with dire social problems like other world-class cities – a city in which he was still an outsider. The film begins with Jaibo, a young delinquent who has just been released from the reformatory, returning to the streets where he is free to resume his life, but his desire for revenge and his feelings of having been cheated lead him back into his old life-patterns of crime. His younger friend Pedro, on the other hand, seeks refuge in the enclosed spaces that seem to offer escape from the mean streets – to the foundry where he pursues a job with a future, to the reformatory where he wins the director's trust, and above all to his own household where he continues to seek love from his embittered mother. Sometimes the meanings of the room and the road are reversed, as in the reform school, where Pedro has been confined but which he perceives as a possible route to redemption, yet he is forced back on the road by Jaibo's bullying. In all of these interiors, Pedro's chances are thwarted by Jaibo, who forces him to share his violent fate in the streets. As in *Tristana*, both the freedom of the road and the refuge of the room prove to be merely phantoms.

As in *Las Hurdes*, the problems are too deeply systemic to be solved by individual acts of kindness (from a filmmaker or bureaucrat) or by neorealist solutions (of liberal reform and family forgiveness). They demand radical change – a need underscored by the surrealistic touches that jolt us out of our complacency and false hope. Despite their moral differences as antagonists, there is an uncanny similarity between Pedro's Oedipal dream of reaching for his mother's raw meat, which is stolen by Jaibo who hides under the kitchen table like a stray dog; and Jaibo's final vision of a mangy dog crouching on his chest as he lies dying in the street, calling out for his mother. The similarity is deeply disturbing because

it suggests not only that Jaibo and Pedro share a common subjectivity, but that they both could turn out to be either the new lover in the secret room or the mad dog killed in the street.

Narrative Vehicles in Mexican Road Movies

After his international success with *Los olvidados*, Buñuel introduced narrative vehicles as visual puns in two commercial Mexican road movies: *Subida al cielo* (Ascent to Heaven, aka Mexican Bus Ride, 1951) and *La ilusión viaja en tranvía* (Illusion Takes the Streetcar, 1953). Although he had earlier used the car that runs down the androgyne in *Un chien andalou* and the oxcart that drives through the elegant parlor in *L'Âge d'or* as surrealist jolts, this was the first time he used vehicles to structure the narrative and motorize picaresque fiction.

As vehicles of public conveyance, the bus and streetcar structure the narrative as a picaresque journey, yet their cramped interiors also double as the inns or literary stopping points along the way – a spatial compression that strains social relations among the passengers. These narratives combine not only the road and the room but also the *pícaro* and the ensemble, which made them effective vehicles for social satire. This satiric potential was developed more fully in *La ilusión viaja en tranvía*, where, according to Buñuel, one can see the social cityscape through the windows.

> We see diverse aspects of Mexican social reality along the streetcar's route: the poor neighborhoods, the butchers from the Rastro slaughterhouse, the black marketers … It's possible to find people carrying boxes of fruit or live turkeys – the most incredible things – on public vehicles in Mexico, … that's why I thought that workers from Rastro should travel on the streetcar carrying quarters of beef, and sanctimonious old women carrying an image of a saint. (Cited in de la Colina and Pérez Turrent, 1992: 108)

While *La ilusión viaja en tranvía* explores the conflicts among these passengers, *Subida al cielo* emphasizes the individual protagonist. Oliverio is on a time-bound quest to find a notary who can ratify the will of his dying mother before he can marry his fiancé Albina. As in *Los olvidados*, Buñuel inserts surrealistic elements into a realistic context, which (he claims) is "precisely what Surrealism did" (Cited in de la Colina and Pérez Turrent, 1992: 109). This surrealist strategy helped *La ilusión viaja en tranvía* win the International Critics Award for the Best Avant-Garde Film at Cannes.

Evoking surrealistic paintings by Frida Kahlo from the 1940s, Oliverio dreams of being connected to his mother by a spiraling orange peel that stretches to him like an umbilical cord and that he holds in his mouth like a pacifier, as the ultimate fetish. He also dreams of making love with the seductive passenger Raquel in the middle of a jungle growing inside the bus, with sheep passing between them.

When the bus gets stuck in the river, Buñuel relies on a supernatural solution. "It came to me during the shooting to have a little girl arrive with an oxcart and, with hardly any effort, manage to get the bus out of the jam. Later, this is the girl we see dead in the coffin the father carries on the bus" (cited in de la Colina and Pérez Turrent, 1992: 75). We also saw a child's coffin carry a dead girl downstream to the cemetery in *Las Hurdes*. But here in *Subida al cielo* these surrealistic images are balanced by the social reality that other passengers bring on board.

Buñuel realized these narrative vehicles could represent both a physical journey through social space and an interior trip driven by desire. He would explore this use of narrative vehicles (cars, trains, and horse-drawn carriages) for an interior journey much more fully in *Él* (*This Strange Passion*, a film made in 1952 between the two Mexican road movies) and in *Belle de jour* (the film that launched his final period of filmmaking in France). The vehicle of public conveyance that proved best suited to convey subjectivity was the train. For, not only could it display a succession of interior images (as in a mental train of thoughts) but, given its class divisions in seating, it could reveal deep-seated class antagonism. Even in *El ángel exterminador*, Buñuel's ultimate "room" film, the bourgeois ensemble acts as if its entrapment were caused by a disaster (like a train-wreck or shipwreck) rather than a failure of will and accuses the fleeing servants of being rats who deserted the ship. Comparing their situation to a train-wreck, one of the female guests exposes her own class-bound mentality by describing a train-wreck she once saw: "The third-class compartment, full of common people, had been squashed like a huge accordion. And inside … what carnage! I must be insensitive, because the suffering of those poor people didn't move me at all."

These class-bound connections with the train recur throughout Buñuel's canon. In *Él*, the train carries Don Francisco and his bride on their honeymoon and introduces his manic-depressive behavior that turns their marriage into a nightmare. Although they travel first class, the spatial confinement of their compartment puts pressure on Francisco, who begins to reveal the depth of his paranoia. This use of the train – both to expose class relations and reveal subjectivity – built on Buñuel's earlier experimentation with these humbler vehicles of public conveyance, the bus and the streetcar, in his Mexican road movies.

Interestingly, what Buñuel sees as the strongest similarity between the two Mexican road movies is not their narrative vehicles but their use of narrative compression to rupture the realism. As he puts it: "The number of incidents that would normally happen on several journeys are collected into a single trip. Reality is not usually so concentrated" (cited in de la Colina and Pérez Turrent, 1992: 76). It is this line of experimentation – this interweaving of many mini-stories within an open-ended narrative – that soon leads him to combine picaresque fiction with the religious pilgrimage. This combination was already suggested in *Subida al cielo* through the miraculous recovery of the bus from the river and through the film's title (Ascent to Heaven), and in *La ilusión viaja en tranvía*, through the presence of the saint on the streetcar. But before he turned to the religious road movie, he first explored the inward journey into subjectivity.

Internalizing the Narrative Vehicle and Eroticizing the Room: From *Él* to *Belle de jour*

In both *Él* and *Belle de jour*, narrative vehicles function as time travel, rupturing the linear plot as they freely move backward and forward in space and time, transporting both characters and spectators on physical and mental journeys. The confining cars and train in *Él* prove as frustrating as the architectural structures in thwarting the desires of the paranoid protagonist. In *Belle de jour*, the horse-drawn carriage and Parisian brothel, representing the road and the room, provide two rival sites of erotic fantasy for the masochistic protagonist, who searches for ways to combine them. In both films, the increasing internalization of both the road and the room intensifies their respective versions of *l'amour fou*.

Él begins where *El ángel exterminador* ends – in the immersive recesses of a Mexican cathedral packed with worshipers. But this time it is Holy Week being celebrated and the wordless ritual succeeds in demonstrating how an individual's erotic desire can become perverted. As the officiating priest kisses the bare foot of an androgynous young peasant, we see Don Francisco literally twist his gaze from that holy spectacle of abasement to the fetishistic black suede pumps of the woman, Gloria, with whom he is already in the process of becoming erotically obsessed. The music, chanting, incense, and spatial crowding make this hothouse interior of the cathedral all the more immersive and dreamlike. They transform it into a communal version of the eroticized secret room – an ideal setting for igniting a perverted version of *l'amour fou*.

As soon as Don Francisco rushes out of the cathedral in pursuit of Gloria, he faces the first of many narrative ruptures. He is confronted by the church fathers, whose ironic words awaken him from his erotic reverie by questioning the reason for his urgency: "If it's important, then a Christian has no business doing it." At that moment an automobile drives up and carries Gloria out of sight and out of reach. It is the first of several narrative vehicles that will change the course of the story, creating a recurring zigzag pattern that twists the lines of the plot as decisively as Francisco's gaze and desire were twisted in the church.

Other narrative vehicles soon appear – not only private cars but also the train that carries them on their honeymoon, and where the zigzag pattern is first displayed as a concrete image. The zigzag becomes associated with Francisco's wild swings of mood: between arrogance and self-abasement, between accusations and abject apologies that define his manic-depressive subjectivity. Francisco's demented train of thought can never be derailed from the deeply disturbing zigzag that he first experienced in the church, as his slanting gaze was first enthralled by Gloria's fetishistic shoe.

Private automobiles also mark and help smooth over the ruptures in the narrative. The first time we see the car of Gloria's former fiancé, Raúl, we are confused because we don't yet understand how much time has passed within the narrative

ellipsis (between Francisco's transgressive kiss of Gloria in the garden when she was still engaged to Raúl, and her accidental encounter with Raúl several months after her marriage). Although Raúl's car nearly runs Gloria down in the street, it soon becomes a safe haven where she can tell him her inset narrative about her nightmarish marriage to Francisco. Signaling another narrative rupture, the car reappears in the final sequence, where it carries Raúl and Gloria (who are now married) and their young son (who may be the result of their adulterous relationship or Francisco's biological child) to visit Francisco in the monastery where he is confined.

While these narrative vehicles carry us across the temporal gaps and dramatic ruptures in the narrative, the confining rooms intensify the ups and downs of Francisco's insane jealousy and manic-depressive paranoia. Evoking the modernist architecture of Antonio Gaudí, his father's house does not have a single straight line. This is where he lures Gloria and where he kisses her in the garden, a kiss that not only ruptures her relationship with Raúl but also disrupts the linear drive of the narrative. Once we return to this house in Gloria's flashback, we see how he imprisons her in its slanted rooms. Even on their honeymoon, Francisco feels the pressure of their hotel room in Guanajuato, imagining it is being penetrated by her former lovers who are peeping through the keyhole or listening through the porous walls. It is as if he wants to seal them both off together in a tomb, blocking all portals. The rooms that have the most powerful effect on his psyche are those associated with the church: the cathedral, where his erotic obsession begins and where he finally breaks down and attacks the priest; the church tower, where the overview inspires him with delusions of grandeur and arouses his desire to kill Gloria; and the monastery where he is finally confined and where his zigzag walk up the pathway reveals he is as demented as ever.

Unlike *Los olvidados* and *Subida al cielo*, *Él* bombed at the box office, yet it elicited words of praise from French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who used the film to illustrate his own theories of paranoia. This response encouraged Buñuel to continue his ongoing dialogue with theory: "My only consolation came from Jacques Lacan, who saw the film at a special screening for psychiatrists at the Cinémathèque in Paris and praised certain of its psychological truths. In Mexico, *Él* was nothing short of disastrous" (Buñuel, 1983: 204). He continued this line of psychological exploration in *Belle de jour*, this time choosing female masochism rather than male paranoia as his primary focus, but still relying on the interplay between the road and the room to reveal not only the dynamics of desire but also the way it was intensified by class conflict.

In *Belle de jour* the vehicle of public conveyance (an old-fashioned horse-drawn carriage) provides entry into the subjectivity of the singular female protagonist Séverine, whose erotic life and desires are explored. As she freely moves between a luxurious Parisian apartment she shares with her husband, and an urban brothel where she works under the assumed name of Belle, her class mobility (like her dual identity as frigid wife and masochistic whore) heightens the sexual pleasures

she experiences in secret rooms, whether servicing a vulgar tradesman or a decadent duke. Significantly, it is the picaresque street-thug Marcel who provides her with the greatest pleasure but who ultimately shares Jaibo's fate – being shot down in the street like a stray dog. Thus Belle faces the same forked paths that were earlier available to Tristana – choosing between the mad dog (who, like Jaibo and Marcel, threatens to contaminate everyone he encounters), or her handsome, disabled young husband Pierre, who (like Tristana's French husband Horacio) cannot satisfy her deviant desires that were possibly unleashed by her sexual victimization as a child. These desires remain as mysterious as the contents of the little black box that her Orientalized customer brings to the brothel, providing Belle with inscrutable pleasure and the narrative with delicious irony. Though this foreign fetish belongs to the supply-and-demand dynamics of consumer capitalism and to a transnational erotic desire, its sense of mystery evokes the third context for fetishism – religious ritual, which played a crucial role in *Él*. It is this realm that is explored in Buñuel's religious quest films that were also launched by his Mexican road movies.

Going on a Pilgrimage or Holding Your Sacred Ground

In Buñuel's four most sacrilegious films, the central character is deeply religious and the conflict between orthodoxy and heresy intense. Yet, the interplay between movement and stasis, the road and the room, is still central.

Two of these works are religious road movies. *Nazarín* (1958) tells the story of (in Buñuel's words) "an exceptional priest who wants to live in agreement with the spirit and letter of original Christianity" (cited in de la Colina and Pérez Turrent, 1992: 133). But given the corruption of the world he lives in (the Mexico of Porfirio Díaz), he is forced to leave the Church, for his good deeds "only beget conflicts and disasters." Although he gives everything he has to others and willingly forgives their sins, these actions do not win the admiration of the Church nor the gratitude of those he seeks to help. *La Voie lactée* (1969) presents a pilgrimage that moves freely between France and Spain, present and past, piety and sacrilege, documentary and Surrealism. Both films were made in exile – the former in Mexico and the latter in France – but both are deeply rooted in Spain.

The character Nazarín, played by Spanish actor Francisco Rabal, is a quixotic priest who was born in Spain and who, at the end of the film, hears the drums of Calanda, a unique sound from Buñuel's home village that "seems to echo some secret rhythm in the outside world, and provokes a real physical shiver that defies the rational mind" (Buñuel, 1983: 20). Like *Tristana*, it is based on a novel by Benito Pérez Galdós, one of Buñuel's favorite Spanish writers. The film adaptation does little to acknowledge the move to a Mexican locale; it merely transfers the present-day conflict to the time of Porfirio Díaz. Partly because the film was so widely

misunderstood (particularly by the faithful who failed to recognize its subversive dimensions), Buñuel claims: "Of all the films I made in Mexico, *Nazarín* is one of my favorites" (1983: 215).

In *La Voie lactée*, a pair of *pícaros* of different generations (evoking the thuggish Marcel and his elder Spanish accomplice played by Rabal in *Belle de jour*) make a pilgrimage from France to Spain, and in the process reveal a catalogue of religious heresies. More specifically, their destination is the shrine of St James in the city of Santiago de Compostela, which draws thousands of pilgrims to Spain every year. The journey shows how dead saints and scriptures can be exhumed from the past and remobilized as transgressive objects of desire, particularly when positioned within unlikely contemporary contexts (e.g., an elegant restaurant where the maître d' argues with his staff over fine points of orthodoxy, and a student recital in an exclusive suburban school where "anathemas" are voiced by pampered little girls in uniform). The film reminds us that all of "the texts and citations are taken from the Scriptures, modern and ancient works on theology and ecclesiastical history," yet (like the purity of Nazarín's Christian behavior) it is their spatial and temporal re-envoicement within modern settings that exposes their absurdity as well as the material and moral limits of the contemporary locale.

The violation of boundaries is most extreme on the register of time. For not only does *La Voie lactée* reference the recent political uprisings of May '68 (which provide another context for testing these scriptural citations), but it also performs an ingenious form of time travel that mobilizes familiar narrative devices (like flashbacks) and common objects (like clothes and beards) to freely move from one century to another and recast modern characters as Jesus and Mary. Despite the film's preoccupation with religious subjects, it pushes the picaresque structure to such an extreme abstraction that we cannot miss its politically subversive potential. As in *Nazarín*, it is this free movement on the road, both spatially and temporally, that most effectively exposes the pervasiveness of corruption and the ineffectuality of pure virtue.

The protagonists of the other two religious films, *Viridiana* (1961) and *Simón del desierto* (Simon of the Desert, 1965), are religious fanatics who are stubbornly committed to immobility: they resist temptation and modernity by holding on to their own holy ground, but still risk losing their faith. In *Simón del desierto* (a film never finished), the saint is literally immobile – living on a column in the desert, resisting all temptations of the flesh, including food and drink and a bearded Silvia Pinal playing not the pious nun Viridiana nor the virginal Valkyrie, but the Devil as a woman. Though Simon's body remains immobile, his mind still wanders. At the end of the film, it transports him to the future where he confronts the youth culture from the mid-1960s, whose pop music also threatens the virginal Viridiana. As in *La Voie lactée*, this leap provides a form of time travel – but by moving forward rather than backward (as in *La Voie lactée*), the ending now seems dated, forever stuck in its own time.

The issue of getting stuck is more complex for Viridiana, a nun who doesn't want to leave the convent but is urged by her Mother Superior to go visit her rich uncle before taking her final vows. After her traumatic visit with her uncle (who may have raped her), she insists on returning to the convent where (like Simón on his column) she will be safe from temptation. But, just before stepping onto the local bus (a narrative vehicle that would have carried her to a different resolution of the plot), she is detained by the local officials and gets stuck at her uncle's estate. She is stopped by Don Jaime's suicide (which he purposely designed to entrap her), by the material inheritance he left her (which is the reason the Mother Superior insisted on her going to her Uncle's in the first place), and by her cousin Jorge (a modern Spaniard whom she had insisted should be acknowledged by her uncle). In contrast to Viridiana, who bestows charity and forgiveness on venal beggars who are totally sacrilegious and corrupt, Jorge shows his moral worth by trying to modernize Spain. In one sequence on the road, he condemns the cruel practice of tying a dog to a cart, but has to buy the dog in order to gain its freedom. As soon as he performs this rescue, he sees another dog chained to a cart going in the opposite direction. This quixotic road sequence is similar to one in *Nazarín*, where he offers to work for free but ends up being attacked as a scab by the workers who expect to get paid. The actions of all three do-gooders raise the question: how do you make a meaningful intervention in a totally corrupt society?

As I argued in *Blood Cinema* (Kinder, 1993), we can also see *Nazarín* and *Viridiana* as a quixotic pair, since both deal with the ironic disillusionment of a Good Samaritan who tries to aid the poor but whose religious passion arouses erotic desire in others less devout. The connection was strengthened by having Francisco Rabal, the Spanish actor who was Nazarín, also play the sardonic cousin who finally triumphs over Viridiana. In the final scene Viridiana goes to Jorge's room, where she finds him playing cards with the maid and listening to pop music. Though she had previously resisted him, she now docilely enters his room (like the sacrificial lambs in *El ángel exterminador*), giving up her faith and becoming another pawn in his game. Similarly, at the end of *Nazarín*, when he is "overwhelmed by [his] failure as a priest and as a man," an ordinary woman offers him a pineapple out of pity. Though he at first refuses it out of pride, he then accepts it and breaks into tears, realizing the futility of his lifelong struggle and sacrifice. This is the moment when he hears, not contemporary rock 'n' roll, but the maddening drums of Calanda. Both are apparently liberated from their religious obsession, yet it is hard to say whether that improves or worsens their situation.

The fate of both films proved to be outside of Buñuel's control. Although *Viridiana* was Spain's official entry at the Cannes film festival, where it won the Palme d'Or, it was condemned by the Vatican and banned in Spain for 16 years, forcing Buñuel to change its nationality from Spanish to Mexican, as he had changed his own nationality years earlier. Yet, *Nazarín*, a film he was forced to make in Mexico rather than Spain, was misread and, ironically, rewarded as a consequence.

> At the Cannes Festival ... where [*Nazarín*] won the Grand Prix International, it almost received the Prix de l'Office Catholique as well. Three members of the jury argued passionately for it, but, happily, they were in the minority. ... After the election of Pope John XXIII, I was actually invited to New York, where the abominable Spellman's successor, Cardinal Somebody-or-Other, wanted to give me an award for the film. (Buñuel, 1983: 216)

The Final Radical Remix: *Le Fantôme de la liberté* and *Cet obscur objet du désir*

The dialectic of the road and the room returns with great force in Buñuel's last two films, *Le Fantôme de la liberté* and *Cet obscur objet du désir*, where each trope is pushed to its ultimate limits and enriched by intertextual dialogues with works by others. In *Le Fantôme de la liberté* the primary dialogue is with *The Saragossa Manuscript*, the 1965 film by Polish director Wojciech Has, based on Jan Potocki's Polish novel, *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa* (1815), both of which Buñuel "adored." In his autobiography he claims, "I saw this film a record-breaking three times and convinced Alatriste to buy it for Mexico in exchange for *Simón of the Desert*" (Buñuel, 1983: 224).

Like *Le Fantôme de la liberté*, *The Saragossa Manuscript* opens on the battlefield of the Napoleonic wars, where both Spanish and French combatants are distracted by a building and a book. In Has's film it is an inn where a fleeing Spanish soldier seeks respite from the war and discovers a book, containing images and stories, about his grandfather. When a French officer enters the room, he becomes equally caught up in the book and they are both recruited as readers of the tales that follow, which temporarily suspend the violent conflict between them. Thus, the historic battle won by the French is converted into merely a frame for a series of picaresque adventures that focuses primarily on Spaniards (and Muslims). While the room at the inn provides sanctuary from the war outside, its spatial confinement can be escaped through the powers of fiction – inset stories and images that carry us readers to other genres and locations, including a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. This pilgrimage is merely a brief reference in *The Saragossa Manuscript*, but it becomes the central narrative frame in *La Voie lactée*. In all three films these embedded tales enable us to time travel into the past, where we inevitably get stuck. Yet, according to Buñuel, unlike *The Saragossa Manuscript* and *La Voie lactée*, which feature central *pícaros*, in *Le Fantôme de la liberté* "we no longer find any continuous characters who serve to interconnect the stories. They have their small story and depart so that a new character can enter with a new story" (de la Colina and Pérez Turrent, 1992: 196). Thus narrative mobility is pushed to sheer abstraction, as in a Road Runner cartoon, moving beyond the conventions of picaresque fiction into the realms of narratology.

In *Le Fantôme de la liberté* (a film made in France by a Spaniard), the Napoleonic conflict is extended over a series of printed texts and images that reinforce rather than distract us from the battle. One of the first images we see is Goya's painting, *El tres de mayo de 1808* (The Third of May 1808), as a printed title informs us: "The action of this film begins in Toledo, in 1808, during the occupation of the city by Napoleon's troops. Inspired by a tale by Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, a Spanish romantic poet." Although the French may have the upper hand on the battlefield, the representations of the war are controlled by Spaniards – even though Buñuel (dressed as a modest monk) is one of the prisoners executed by a French firing squad, as if bringing Goya's painting to life.

Rather than the country inn typical of picaresque fiction, the building here is a church, where the conflict escalates between the French officer who commits sacrilege against not only the holy wafers and wine (the body and blood of Christ) but also the corpse of the lovely Spanish noblewoman in her tomb. To protest against these violations, the Spaniards reassert their control: the statue of her husband hits the French officer, changing the genre from historic epic to gothic romance, and an unidentified off-screen female voice-over intrudes, describing the miracle that kept the dead lady's face as fresh as a rose. Once we cut to a contemporary scene in a Parisian park, we realize that this woman (a Spanish nanny) is reading the romantic tale by Bécquer aloud to her French counterpart (who is busy knitting, like Madame Lafarge). Like the Saragossa manuscript, this book now transports us out of the battlefield into a new chronotope – from Spain to France, and from the nineteenth century to the present, where (instead of getting stuck as we did at the end of *Simón del desierto*) we are now free to move from one episode to another.

What Buñuel adopts from *The Saragossa Manuscript* is this extreme flexibility of narrative embedding which is a defining convention in picaresque fiction, one that generates dramatic shifts in content, tone, and genre and thereby denaturalizes the dominance of any narrative regime. Both texts not only look back to medieval collections of tales (like those by Boccaccio and Chaucer) but also forward to interactive games (where avatars are frequently embroiled in battles and players keep trying to escape a spatial trap as they find their way to the next level).

Once Buñuel's *Le Fantôme de la liberté* cuts to the Parisian park, the conflict between France and Spain is reduced to the nationality of the two nannies – the Spanish reader and French listener – who both represent a lower class than that of their bourgeois employers and prepubescent charges. This weave of discursive registers is emphasized when the Spanish nanny asks her companion to define the word *paraphernalia*, and receives a detailed response worthy of a linguist or ethnographer. As it addresses fine distinctions of gender and nationality, it violates our assumptions about what a person of her class is likely to know. These class distinctions and power dynamics are reinstated once the narrative follows the Spanish nanny home to the household of the Foucaulds, a name whose errant spelling does not prevent us from connecting them to theorist Michel Foucault, particularly when they unjustly fire their servant and pretend they could not do otherwise.

This amusing yet rigorous attention to discourse enables us to see that Buñuel is leading us into the deep structure of non-linear narrative that underlies picaresque fiction. For, as Susan Suleiman (1978) argued, in an essay that applied the narrative theory of Roman Jakobson to understand the unique narrative experimentation of *Le Fantôme de la liberté*, syntactically the film has a perfect hyper-linearity as it always follows a narrative agent or object from one sequence to another, yet its misreading of semantic binaries creates ironic disjunctions and absurd ruptures – for example, socializing the wrong end of the digestive process (defecating rather than dining), or having the wrong outcome follow the guilty verdict at the murder trial of the sniper (dismissal rather than death), or searching for the lost little girl (because she is present rather than absent). We find ourselves concerned not only with structural choices (which character or object to follow into the next tale) but also with semantic decisions about the meaning of specific words (paraphernalia and pornography, guilt and innocence, freedom and tyranny). To explain these discursive challenges, Buñuel's Professor cites the relativism of cultural contexts and explicitly references Margaret Mead – an explanation also relevant to the disjunctive rhetoric of *Las Hurdes*. But in this film the semantic ruptures resonate more powerfully with Bakhtin, who showed how they denaturalize the truth-value of all language, both verbal and visual.

Although the narrative experimentation in *Le Fantôme de la liberté* moves beyond picaresque fiction, it demonstrates the power of its conventions in combining the road and the room – most brilliantly in the sequence at the inn. As in most picaresque tales, at some point the *pícaro* stops at a country inn to spend the night. Although each inn introduces new narrative possibilities – by combining public and private space and introducing a new array of characters – it provides the room where *pícaros* frequently become entrapped. In this case, the guest at the inn is not a *pícaro* living by his wits, but a bourgeois nurse going to see her dying father, reminding us that death lies at the end of all of our journeys. Yet picaresque fiction frequently convinces us that it is possible to escape any narrative situation – even if you are losing a war (like the Spanish officer in *The Saragossa Manuscript*), or are shot dead (like the characters in *Le Charme discret de la bourgeoisie*), or diagnosed with cancer (like a character in *Le Fantôme de la liberté*) – because you can always escape into another story. This is the ultimate use of an expanding middle to forestall a premature death (as theorized by Peter Brooks in *Reading for the Plot* [1984] and as performed by Scheherazade in *The Arabian Nights*).

In *Le Fantôme de la liberté*, the traditional inn becomes both a model of database narrative and a microcosm for the film's overall structure. The rooms off the upstairs hallway provide a visualization of the mini-stories that compete for control over the narrative. As guests take turns using the WC, doors repeatedly open and slam shut as they rush in and out of the hallway and into the foreground of the main narrative. Yet, Buñuel's camera can choose to follow any of these characters into a separate room and tale. For example, it visits the nurse as she entertains a group of Dominican monks who help her pray for her dying father,

a prayer meeting that turns into a game of poker, which provides another model of database narrative. As cards are shuffled and dealt and as players bet Medals, Virgins, and Sacred Hearts, we realize all the characters and their perversions can be similarly categorized into suits (Dominicans or Franciscans, masochists or sadists, incestuous aunts or nephews). Even spectators are carefully chosen, for although everyone is invited to watch the whipping of the masochist by his maitresse, these performers prefer to outrage the monks. When tales are combined, they draw attention to the formal paradigms of sound/image and national identities of Spain/France, especially when a Spanish flamenco dancer and guitarist in one room provide erotic background music for the incestuous French couple down the hall and when their music is rejected by the masochist, who rudely shuts the door to their room.

Although this remix of rooms is compelling, it is the endless nomadic movement of the narrative that is most striking in *Le Fantôme de la liberté*, "one that passes from one thing to another through some small detail" (cited in de la Colina and Pérez Turrent, 1992: 196). Despite its radical unpredictability, Buñuel makes this structure look simple to achieve. The linear drive is accelerated by narrative engines – not only by speeding cars that get tickets and cause collisions and by planes that drown out political lines of dialogue, but also by visualizing machines (cameras, X-rays, rifles, and dreams) that target chosen subjects whose images are easily stitched together. Despite its radical transgression of the boundaries between cultures, centuries, and genres and the borders between life and death, the narrative still coheres. For, the film begins and ends with a massacre, one witnessed by human storytellers (in the opening Napoleonic execution scene in Spain), the other by animals (in the final contemporary battle with student activists at the Paris zoo). No matter how amusing its tone and no matter how many episodes expand its middle, like all stories, this open-ended narrative still inevitably ends in death.

Those Obscure Dynamics of Desire

Whereas *Le Fantôme de la liberté* generated a productive dialogue with a film Buñuel adored, *Cet obscur objet du désir* cultivates a rivalry with a film he abhorred – Josef von Sternberg's *The Devil Is a Woman* (1935), starring Marlene Dietrich – for both were adaptations of the same French novel, Pierre Louÿs's *La Femme et le pantin* (The Woman and the Puppet, 1898). In his autobiography Buñuel disparages Sternberg's claims to originality, insisting he was always too predictable: "Sternberg's choice of subject matter was not exactly distinguished; he was notorious for basing his movies on cheap melodramas" (Buñuel, 1983: 132). In his own adaptation, Buñuel leverages theories of desire to show how such commonplace material can be radically transformed.

Just as *Le Fantôme de la liberté* pushes the nomadic flexibility of picaresque fiction to its illogical yet amusing limits (even beyond those earlier transgressed in *L'Âge d'or*), *Cet obscur objet du désir* performs a similar process on *l'amour fou* and its underlying dynamics of desire. In contrast to his earlier explorations of these dynamics in *Él* and *Belle de jour*, where the emphasis was on the subjective inner life of the deviant protagonists, here the emphasis is more external and spatialized, as in *Un chien andalou*.

The romance between Don Mateo and Conchita is as absurd as the interaction between the lovers in *Un chien andalou*. Thus, instead of reading this film for the story or for insight into its perverse characters (as we might read *The Devil Is a Woman*), we are encouraged to read it for what it reveals about the dynamics of desire – how it functions within the cramped domestic spaces of melodrama, how it leverages fetishism in the film's visual style and systems of substitution, and how it remixes the interplay between the room and the road. For even the train, that narrative vehicle of public conveyance which Buñuel had earlier used in *Él*, now functions not to reveal a train of subjective images but to provide a practical means of shuttling Don Mateo and Conchita between France and Spain, love and hate, empowerment and humiliation, while delineating their identities across registers of nationality, class, gender, and generation. Most important, the train provides Don Mateo with a proper setting for telling his version of his perverse relationship with Conchita, a narration shaped by social class.

The film opens with Don Mateo buying a first-class train ticket from Spain to Paris. Just as Gloria told the flashback narrative of her nightmarish marriage to Don Francisco in a private car within *Él*, Don Mateo tells the story of his sadomasochistic, class-crossed relationship with Conchita within his first-class compartment on the train. Acting as his narratees, those sharing his compartment not only belong to the French bourgeoisie as he does but they also have mutual friends or turn out to be Don Mateo's neighbors, sharing a neighborhood whose inhabitants are restricted to a certain race and class. Despite the mobility of these passengers, they are stuck in class positions and frozen attitudes – like the guests in *El ángel exterminador*. They include a judge (who is a close friend of Don Mateo's cousin), a psychologist dwarf (whose size, despite his perceptiveness, brings the English term "shrink" to mind), and a bourgeois mother (whose young daughter asks the hermeneutic question that sets the narrative in motion but is then banished to the corridor since she is too young to hear this X-rated story). Not only are these listeners sympathetic to Don Mateo's side but they understand that Conchita is an object both of his desire and contempt, contradictory feelings that intensify each other. They see her lower-class status as both part of her erotic appeal and the reason why he sensibly won't marry her. They are as biased as Raúl (Gloria's former fiancé in *Él*) in accepting his version of the story, which might make us question the class dynamics of our own response. But at least, we are not as insensitive as the woman in *El ángel exterminador* who witnessed the train-wreck and felt no sympathy for the lower-class carnage.

The most striking absurdity in the story is the use of two different actresses to play Conchita: one Spanish (Ángela Molina), who looks voluptuously low class; the other French (Carole Bouquet), who appears more delicately bourgeois. Although this doubling might bring to mind the dual identities of the female protagonist in *Belle de jour* (Séverine and Belle), there it told us something about the character and her subjectivity, whereas here, like the double casting of the Chief of Police and Minister of the Interior in *Le Fantôme de la liberté*, it draws our attention to the fundamental artificiality of Buñuel's characters. Instead of being presented as three-dimensional individuals with whom we can identify, his characters are avatars or subject positions, which are only temporarily occupied by actors. Within the fictional world of *Cet obscur objet du désir*, this doubling of Conchita apparently makes no difference to Don Mateo, who is too self-absorbed to notice. But for us spectators, whose attention is consistently drawn to the dynamics of desire, it reveals the endless chain of substitutions that lie at the heart of fetishism.

Conchita occupies a number of subject positions, some of which are hard to reconcile: a maid in Don Mateo's household, a hat-check girl in a French restaurant, a flamenco dancer in a Spanish nightclub, a member of a European terrorist group, a wayward daughter of a devoutly religious mother, and an innocent young daughter sold by her impoverished mother to a rich older man. In one scene where she is missing, Don Mateo stares at an empty chair, a concrete object that signifies her absence and intensifies his desire. Given this literal emphasis on subject position, it is easy to spot the substitutions, not only between the two actresses playing Conchita, but also between other objects of desire and contempt, which similarly go unnoticed by characters in the story. For example, Don Mateo's misogynistic butler claims a woman can easily be replaced by a sack of shit; and a Gypsy woman uses a pig in a blanket instead of a baby to help her beg for money, visual substitutions that demonstrate a comically perverse form of fetishism.

Spatialization permeates every aspect of the narrative. Their sadomasochistic romance is played out in a succession of theatrical rooms associated with humiliation: the shabby Parisian room that she shares with her mother, where he tries to buy her and from which he has them evicted as illegal aliens; the room in the suburbs that he prepares for her deflowering, where she evades him with her chastity belt and hides her young lover; the secret room upstairs in the Spanish flamenco night club where she dances in the nude for Japanese tourists; the spacious room in the house that he buys for her in Sevilla, where she makes love to her young lover while he watches through the front gate; and finally the harem-like room in which they have their intense argument where he draws blood and makes her piss in fear. All of these confining rooms are associated with humiliation – his or hers, sometimes both, usually his.

The most important spacializing of the narrative is the rivalry between foreground and background – between the erotic story evoked in the film's title, and the recurring acts of political terrorism that culminate in the final explosion. This rivalry for control over narrative space makes us explore the relationship between

sex and politics – between the battle of the sexes and class warfare, between the lover in the new room and the mad dog shot dead in the street. In *Anti-Oedipus* (1983), Deleuze and Guattari insist on exploring these relations, as Buñuel had been doing throughout his entire body of work. This structure also spacializes generic conflict and hybridity – with melodrama in the foreground and political satire in the background, each enriching and redefining the other, like desire and contempt. Usually performed in the streets or on the road, the political terrorism draws us out of our bourgeois rooms (whether cramped or spacious) where we frequently pretend we are unable or unwilling to change.

Like Roland Barthes's pivotal move from structuralism to post-structuralism in *S/Z* (1970), at the end of Buñuel's career – in the explosive climax of *Cet obscur objet du désir* – he confronts us with a series of conceptual binaries whose oppositions are literally detonated like bombs and whose fusions are revealed as the driving force of his fiction. For Barthes, after having carefully delineated an intricate series of structuralist binaries, it was a matter of demonstrating that denotation is the last of the connotations, that any readerly text can be transformed through a writerly reading, and that the meanings of all texts reside in the interplay between their sequential and agglomerative spaces. For Buñuel it was a matter of literally exploding those forked paths and recurring oppositions between France and Spain, foreground and background, sex and death, desire and contempt, masochism and sadism, metaphor and metonymy, melodrama and satire, oneiric theatre and picaresque fiction – all neatly compressed within the room and the road. Like Buñuel's last two films, this essay has sought to demonstrate how his rigorous conceptual ideas were translated into concrete narrative tactics – ideas that resonate with his entire body of works but whose implementation appeared increasingly simple – like the recurring interplay between the room and the road.

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