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Cover: Luis Buñuel's *Los olvidados* (see page 2); inset: Marilyn Monroe in *The Misfits* (see page 28).

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Marsha Kinder

Hot Spots, Avatars, and Narrative Fields Forever– Buñuel's Legacy for New Digital Media and Interactive Database Narrative

Buñuel learned the fetishizing power of discreet objects from his early days as a Catholic, a lesson that stayed with him all his life.

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Proleptic Pleasures

One of the pleasures in working on Buñuel is that each time you return to his films, you discover they are further ahead of you than you previously thought, which keeps them perpetually at the cutting edge. I think it is partly because he was able to leverage the most radical dimensions of his sources, whether it was the subversive potential of Spanish picaresque fiction or the political corrosiveness of Freud's dreamwork theory and the Surrealist movement it helped spawn. That's why his vision of Freud influenced Lacan—a link that generated Linda Williams' poststructuralist Buñuel in her 1981 study, *Figures of Desire*, and why almost 20 years later Victor Fuentes could make a convincing case for a postmodernist Buñuel.[1] And why in 1978 Susan Suleiman found Buñuel's *The Phantom of Liberty* an illuminating analog for Román Jakobson's structuralist approach to narrative, and why 20 years after that James Tobias treated his narrative networks as an equally productive analog to the cognitive networks of Marvin Minsky.[2]

I want to propose a new context—the convergence between cinema and new digital media—to explore Buñuel's legacy for conceptualizing interactive database narratives and their discreet pleasures, which has been my own primary interest for the last few years and the context in which I have recently been teaching his films. A number of other filmmakers known for their experimentation with nonlinear narrative, such as Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, Agnès Varda, Peter Greenaway, and Raúl Ruiz, have already chosen to refigure the lines of their earlier experimentation through this analogy with new digital interactive forms. I am thinking specifically of Marker's CD-ROM *Immemory* (1999) and his film *Level 5* (1999, where the protagonist is an interface designer working on an electronic game about the Battle of Okinawa), both of which return to the kinds of issues he addressed in pre-digital database films like *La Jetée* (1962) and *Sans soleil* (1982). And of Resnais's pair of multi-branching films, *Smoking/NoSmoking* (1993), based on the eight plays that comprise Alan Ayckbourn's *Intimate Exchanges* (1982), which address many of the temporal issues he had explored earlier in *Last Year in Marienbad* (1961). And of Varda's *The Gleaners and I* (2000), a documentary with a database structure that uses a DV camera to "glean" a fascinating collection of rural and urban scavengers living off the surplus waste of a consumerist culture. In the process, the filmmaker proves to be the most accomplished gleaner of all, especially as she recycles techniques and issues that have preoccupied her from *La Pointe courte* (1954) to *Vagabond* (1985). I also think of Greenaway's continuing experiments with database structure from *The Falls* (1981) to *The Pillow Book* (1997). And of Ruiz's hypertext project at Duke University, which affected his recent adaptation of Proust in *Time Regained* (2000). I am not saying that if Buñuel were still alive he would be following a similar path, but that his radical experimentation provides equally productive strategies for advancing the art of interactive narrative in new digital forms. For, like Jo Labanyi, I think Buñuel's avant-garde practice has always had strong lines of continuity with certain popular forms of mass culture.[3]

Buñuel has hardly been considered a lover of new technology. In his final essay, "Pessimism" (written in Spanish in 1980, three years before his death), he dubbed "technology, science, and information" (along with the population explosion) the four horsemen of the apocalypse that now threaten to destroy the world, and warned, "The glut of information has also brought about a serious deterioration in human consciousness today." For these reasons, he concluded, "Filmmaking seems to me a transitory and threatened art [because] it is very closely bound up with technical developments."[4] Yet Buñuel always believed "a change of forms"—whether in narrative structures or in seemingly trivial etiquette—could potentially become "revolutionary" because any system of conventions "guarantees the survival of the oppressive system."[5] Whenever a new medium comes along, it provides an opportunity for a dramatic change in formal conventions, which was one reason why the modernist Buñuel was so drawn to cinema. So why not explore this potential for radical change in new digital media?

Perhaps the best evidence for the compatibility between these new media and Buñuel's own experimentation is "A Giraffe," his description of a proposed

conceptual sculpture that was published in *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* (vol. 6, May 15, 1933). Describing it as a life-sized giraffe cut from a simple wooden board, Buñuel claims that "the peculiarity that sets it apart" are its 20 spots, which function like digital "hot spots" in an interface design for an interactive installation.

> Each of its spots, which from ten or twelve feet away look perfectly ordinary, is actually formed either by a lid that each viewer can easily open by rotating it on a small hinge placed invisibly on one side, or by an object, or by a hole revealing the light of day . . . or by a concavity containing the various objects detailed in the following list. It should be noted that this giraffe doesn't make complete sense until its full potential is realized, that is to say, until each of its spots performs the function for which it was intended.[6]

That is, until it becomes truly interactive. Once you know about Buñuel's database of 20 objects (each of which delivers a powerful surrealistic jolt), you realize this piece could be fully realized only in the imagination or in cyberspace. Yet some of the items evoke specific images from his films.[7] For example, in spot #4, through a small grate ("like that of a prison"), . . . "we hear a real orchestra of one hundred musicians playing the overture to *Die Meistersinger*"—an image he later tried to insert in *Los olvidados*. And in spot #12, we see "a very beautiful photo of the head of Christ with a crown of thorns, but ROARING WITH LAUGHTER," which prefigures an image he would later use in *The Milky Way*. Spots #2 and 17 assault the viewer's vision—as Buñuel had already done in *Un Chien andalou* and was to do again in *El*. Yet these assaults in "Giraffe" are more interactive, and thus impossible to achieve in cinema, where the spectator is more protected from the artist's rudeness and wrath.

> In the second [spot]: on the condition that it is opened at noon . . . , we find ourselves in the presence of a cow's eye in its socket, with eyelashes and eyelid. The image of the viewer is reflected in the eye. The eyelid must suddenly close, putting an end to our contemplation . . . . (45)

> In the seventeenth: a powerful jet of steam will gush from the spot at the moment it opens and horribly blind the viewer. (48)

Though most of the 20 spots operate on a simple binary of opening and closing, some suggest the illusion of a limitless database, which makes them not only surreal but also ideally suited for a digital database narrative.

> In the nineteenth: behind the spot, a model less than three feet square representing the Sahara Desert under a crushing light. Covering the sand, a hundred thousand miniature Marists made of wax, their white aprons detaching from their cassocks. In the heat, the Marists melt little by little. (Many millions of Marists must be kept on reserve.) (48)

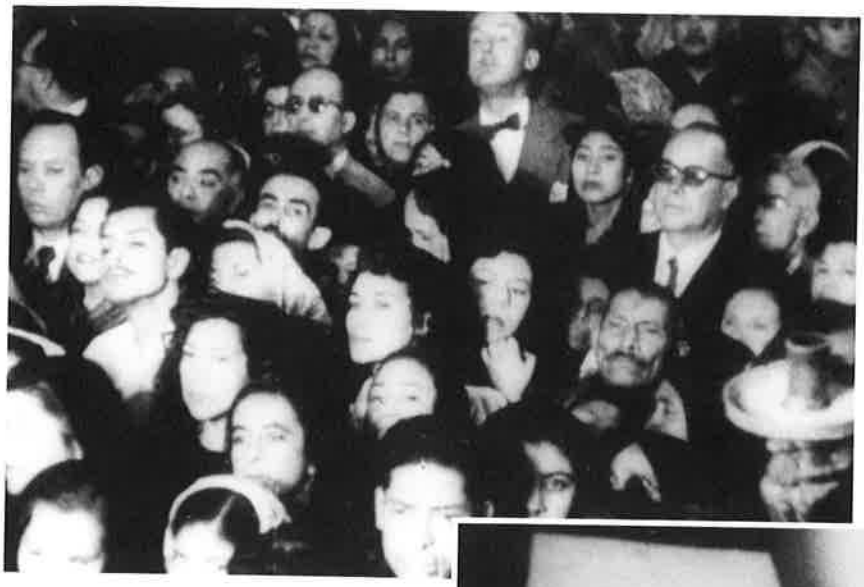
While Buñuel's proposed Giraffe could serve as an interface design for creating an interactive VR installation, I find it more productive to use it as a blueprint for adapting his filmic experimentation to cyberspace.

Clarifying Terms

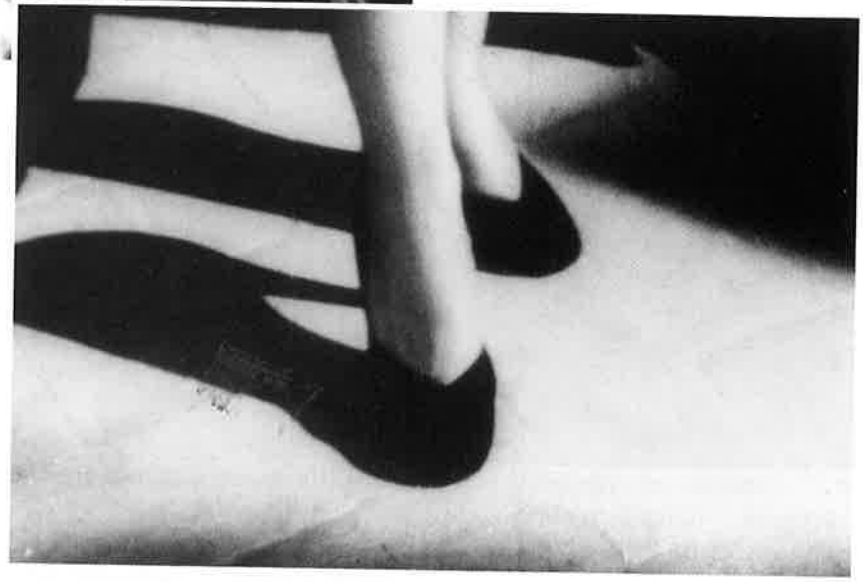
By *"new" digital media*, I am referring loosely to several forms without making any attempt to address their significant differences (which would require another essay): the Internet, electronic games, CD-ROMs, DVDs, DVD-ROMs, VR environments, and interactive installations. All of these media can function as vehicles for transmitting narratives, but they are also capable of serving other nonnarrative functions.

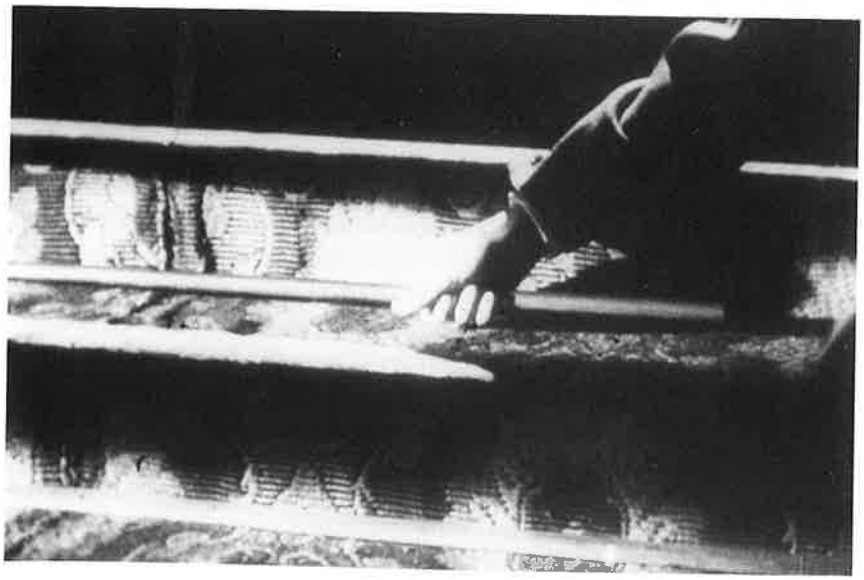
Interactivity is harder to clarify because it wavers between two poles. While all narratives are in some sense interactive in that their meanings always grow out of a collaboration between the idiosyncratic subjectivities of authors and audiences and the reading conventions of the respective cultures they inhabit and languages they speak, all interactivity is also an illusion because the rules established by the designers of the text necessarily limit the user's options. Interactivity thus tends to function as a normative term—either fetishized as the ultimate pleasure or demonized as a deceptive fiction. Even those who fetishize it, like new media theorists Sandy Stone and Andy Lippman (who define it as a "mutual and simultaneous activity on the part of both participants, usually working toward some goal"), acknowledge the need to create the illusory "impression" of an infinite database (like Buñuel's millions of Marists) from which the user's choices are actually being drawn.[8]

One productive way of avoiding these two extremes (of fetishizing or demonizing interactivity) is to position the user or player as a "performer" of the



In *El*, Don Francisco's tormented narrative of "amour fou" is launched during a Catholic Mass for Holy Week, when he picks a particular object for fetishization out of a database (which we viewers are also able to scan). He singles out not a face from the crowd (though that option is clearly visible, left), but rather a particular pair of black pumps from a full line-up of shoes (below).





Whenever Don Francisco experiences an emotional outburst, he finds an object at hand to intensify his feelings, as in this staircase scene where he expresses his insane jealousy by beating the steps with an iron bar in a masturbatory rage.

One of the most potent hot spots in *El* is the fetishizing close-up of the initial transgressive kiss between Don Francisco and Gloria, which is followed by a big-bang explosion that not only figuratively suggests an orgasmic climax but also quite literally ruptures the film's narrative coherence both temporally (several months forward) and spatially (from Mexico City to the dam-construction site).

narrative—like an actor interpreting a role or a musician playing a score, contributing her own idiosyncratic inflections and absorbing the experience into her own personal database of memories. Although any performance is at least partly structured by the text, it is also affected by the repertoire of past performances (by this player and others) within this particular genre, medium, and culture.This approach works particularly well with Buñuel's films, where multiple characters and actors frequently compete for the same role. By privileging interactivity, new digital media and their critical discourse encourage us to rethink the distinctive interactive potential of earlier narrative forms, which is precisely what I am doing here in the case of Buñuel's cinema.

Database narratives refers to narratives whose structure exposes or thematizes the dual processes of selection and combination that lie at the heart of all stories and that are crucial to language: the selection of particular data (characters, images, sounds, events) from a series of databases or paradigms, which are then combined to generate specific tales. You can find this structure in a wide range of works from European art films created under the influence of narratology (like *The Saragossa Manuscript*, *La Jetée*, *Sans soleil*, *Last Year at Marienbad*, *Eden and After*, *Celine and Julie Go Boating*, *Three Crowns of a Sailor*, *The Falls*, and *Toute une nuit*) to experimental documentaries (like Pat O'Neill's *Water and Power*, José Luis Guerin's *Innisfree* and *Train of Shadows*, Péter Forgács's *Maelstrom* and *The Danube Exodus*, and Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I*) to more mainstream independents influenced by cyberfiction (like *Slacker*, *Groundhog Day*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Lost Highway*, *The Matrix*, *Run Lola Run*, and *Time Code*).[9] Such narratives reveal the arbitrariness of the particular choices made, and the possibility of making other combinations which would create alternative stories. By always suggesting virtu-

ality and the wave of potentialities linked to the uncertainty principle, such narratives inevitably raise meta-narrative issues.

This definition is amazingly consistent with Buñuel's own "synoptic table of the American cinema," a bizarre document he allegedly constructed when he was in Hollywood trying to "learn some good American technical skills," and which he describes in his autobiography, *My Last Sigh*:

> There were several movable columns set up on a large piece of pasteboard: the first for "ambience" (Parisian, western, gangster, etc.), the second for "epochs," the third for "main characters," and so on. Altogether there were four or five categories, each with a tab for easy maneuverability. What I wanted to do was show that the American cinema was composed along such precise and standardized lines that, thanks to my system, anyone could predict the basic plot of a film simply by lining up a given setting with a particular era, ambience, and character.[10]

In contrast to the predictability of Hollywood movies, Buñuel's films (like most of the database narratives listed above) are full of surprising ruptures that reveal the radical potential of the underlying database structure that usually lies hidden behind the story. His films also demonstrate that dreams are the ultimate model of interactive database narrative, for they always rely on a dialectic play between the disruptive power of those seemingly random, absurd sensory percepts (those jarring objects out of context that deliver a surrealistic jolt) and a repressive narrative drive that locks them into conventional structures by imposing chains of causality.

One of the most radical lessons that Buñuel and other Surrealists learned from Freud was the censoring function of the narrative impulse in dreamwork—that process of secondary revision which is operative both within the dream experience itself and also within the interpretive act the morning after. For this narrativizing process distracts the dreamer away from the most subversive meanings of the dream—those discrete percepts (both visual images and sounds) that threaten to explode all master narratives and their authorizing regimes of religion, nationality, and class. Here is how Buñuel described the process in 1958, in a passage reminiscent of his description of the cow's eye which appeared in the second spot of his Giraffe:

> Octavio Paz once said, "A chained man need only shut his eyes to be able to make the world explode"; paraphrasing him, I would add: the white eyelid of the screen need only reflect the light that is its own to blow up the universe.[11]

It is in the ruptures *between* the images that this radical explosion is detonated—an explosion that is made quite literal in that crucial moment in *El* when a transgressive kiss between Don Francisco and Gloria (his best friend's fiancée) blows the linear narrative apart. That is why when we watch a Buñuel film we are always engaged in a struggle—between on the one hand a vigilant attentiveness to disruptive objects and disjunctive sounds and on the other a submissive subordination of them to the normalizing narrative drive that neutralizes their subversive power by confining them within a conventional linear story bound by cause and effect. In those films where the narrative impulse *appears* to prevail—as in his early sound films at Filmófono, his movies made in Mexico (even including *El* and *Exterminating Angel*), and those he made in Spain (*Viridiana* and *Tristana*), and also *Belle de jour*—the perception of those disruptive objects and sounds is all the more subversive because it suddenly threatens to unravel the entire narrative fabric. But in his more blatantly radical films, like *Un Chien andalou*, *L'Age d'or*, *Land Without Bread*, *The Milky Way*, *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, and above all, *The Phantom of Liberty*, the narrative drive itself is obviously ridiculed. In his final film, *That Obscure Object of Desire*, the two sides (the disruptive percepts and the narrative drive) seem perfectly balanced and complementary, for both are equally apparent and both equally ridiculed. For example, our attention is pointedly drawn to absurd objects—such as Don Mateo's burlap sack, whose mysterious contents are compromised by his servant's misogynistic remark that all women are bags of shit; the empty chair that calls attention to Conchita's absence and its powerful impact on the pining Don Mateo; her chastity belt that both frustrates and inflames his desire; and the torn and bloodied lace that is being mended by the woman in the shop window just before the final terrorist explosion brings the movie to an abrupt halt. But we are also constantly reminded of the relentless narrative impulse that drives both Don Mateo's erotic obsession with Conchita and his compulsion to recount it to his traveling companions on the train, including the pompous dwarf psychiatrist, whose deft secondary revision fails to shrink or bind Don Mateo's

That Obscure Object of Desire: Balancing the disruptive percepts and the narrative drive by drawing attention to absurd objects.

amour fou, no matter how hard this perceptive little performer tries.

By privileging the disruptive power of sensory percepts over the normalizing drive of secondary revision, Buñuel's films reveal that so-called master narratives are neither inevitable nor natural but, like all stories, mutable. Thus the vast reservoir of databases from which their narrative elements are drawn proves to be a powerful repository for social and revolutionary change.

Although they cannot all be discussed here, looking at some of Buñuel's strategies will be helpful in attempting to rethink the radical potential of interactive database narratives.

1) On the level of narrative drive: the reliance on incongruous objects or *hot spots*, rather than montage, as the primary means of navigating from one scene or discursive level to another;

2) On the level of characterization: the use of puppet-like *avatars* who are not restricted by traditional notions of consistency, psychology, or narrative logic, but whom we nonetheless find fascinating, engaging, and illuminating;

3) On the level of plot: the creation of a *narrative field* where story possibilities seem limitless, where randomness, repetition, and interruptions are rampant, and where search engines are motored by desire.

These strategies and their distinctive pleasures could, I believe, potentially enrich and complicate the narrative impulse in cyberspace, which unfortunately is still fairly crude. In conference after conference on interactive storytelling, the same question keeps being raised without being answered: How can we create engaging interactive narratives that provide an array of pleasures both emotional and intellectual, that don't have clear-cut beginnings or endings and are full of interruptions, and that still offer a satisfying sense of drama and still make us want to return to them again and again? Buñuel's films provide compelling answers to these questions, primarily because he enables us to see what's at stake ideologically in his formal ruptures from conventional practices. This is the kind of perception that is sorely lacking in cyberspace, despite all the utopian rhetoric about self-authoring and its so-called democratic decentering of master narratives and power.

1. Hot Spots, Warp Zones, and Surrealistic Jolts

To achieve subversive ruptures, Buñuel relies not primarily on montage but rather on common objects or incongruous details in an inappropriate setting that function as hot spots with considerable transgressive power.

> The editing, which puts together scenes shot randomly and brings unity to the film, is a matter of no more than two or three days. By contrast, the details of the shots are developed while filming, with the ongoing aim of breaking up the evolution of each scene, of creating ruptures.[12]

This form of surrealistic jolt, which is also operative in painting and poetry and is constitutive to the structure of dreams, is most disruptive within a naturalistic medium like photography or film, where the representational illusion of reality is potentially most convincing. That's why Buñuel wanted to insert a symphonic orchestra into an abandoned tenement in his so-called neorealist film *Los olvidados*, where (if his producer had allowed it) it would have ruptured the line between social classes as well as the line between source and non-source music. By noticing such beastly incongruities—like the rubber rat dropping from the ceiling as the bourgeois Don Mateo pays off Conchita's mother in *That Obscure Object of Desire*, or the lone bear lumbering through the elegant mansion in *Exterminating Angel*, or the cow lounging on the heroine's luxurious bed and the peasant's ox cart driving through the opulent party in *L'Age d'or*, or the piano with bloody carcasses and appended priests restraining the lecherous hero in *Un Chien andalou*, or the sign reading "S.A.D.E., c.v." outside the engineer's office in *El*—the spectator not only gets a laugh but also realizes there is something terribly wrong with this picture. Or, as the narrator of *Land Without Bread* puts it upon noticing a strange portrait of an aristocrat on the wall of an impoverished school room, "Why is this absurd picture here?" By creating cracks in the bourgeois social order, such questions denaturalize all official demands for logic, unity, and symmetry and all civilized prohibitions and distinctions that protect them. Like

The cow on the bed in *L'Age d'or* is one of Buñuel's most notorious incongruous objects, helping to transform the heroine's bedroom into a warp zone that transports her directly into the realm of desire.

the empowering mushrooms, stars, and keys frequently encountered in video games, the more of these incongruous objects you "get," the more empowered you are to challenge the boss and beat the game.

In Buñuel's most radical films, he uses these objects as interface devices—that is, as "hot spots" or "warp zones" which enable the story, camera, character, or spectator to move from one scene or narrative realm to another—a strategy that creates the illusion of narrative cohesion even when the film has little or no plot. He himself observed: "There was no narrative line in *Un Chien andalou*, and in *L'Age d'or* there was, a type of narrative very similar to that in *The Phantom of Liberty*, one that passes from one thing to another through some small detail."[13]

At times an attentiveness to such details provides a temporary means of escape, as in *Exterminating Angel*, where it enables the bourgeois guests to flee the mansion through a ritual of repetition that depends on their being able to remember exactly how the characters and furniture were positioned when the nightmare of entrapment began. A similar kind of mastery of details is demanded in popular exploratory computer games like *Myst*. In *Belle de jour*, the sounds of screeching cats or the bells of a horse-drawn carriage provide entry into erotic fantasies; and in *El*, *Mexican Bus Ride*, *Diary of a Chambermaid*, *Discreet Charm*, and *That Obscure Object*, a series of cars, trains, and buses functions as narrative vehicles that transport characters and spectators to new twists in the story.

In one scene in *The Phantom of Liberty*, common objects like polished shoes and a friendly dog are alternative options for the camera's scrutiny and for ways of navigating to the next scene, but we can never be certain whether, if either had been chosen, it would have led us to the same sniper sequence that follows, where the choice of scrutiny (both for the camera and rifle) proves a matter of life and death. Occasionally, common objects even function as time machines, as the clothes by the river do in *The Milky Way*, enabling the narrative to jump across centuries—a far more modest and amusing way of spanning time than the famous matched cut from bone to spaceship in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Stanley Kubrick's expensive sci-fi epic released the previous year. Buñuel claims:

> The important thing is that I used any detail to travel from one time period to another. For example: two students from another time participate in the scene in which a bishop who had been a heretic is going to be burned. . . . Everyone wants to apprehend the students, who flee. They run away, get to a river, find the clothes of some present-day hunters who are swimming, put the clothes on and suddenly we have them in our times.[14]

In *The Phantom of Liberty*, one function of the recurring image of Goya's famous painting, *The Third of May, 1808*, is to serve as a hot spot that emphasizes the analogy between the shooting of guns and cameras, for each can be used to choose a privileged target out of an array of possible victims or subjects.

Within the grammar of Hollywood continuity editing, cutting on motion prevents the viewer from noticing the rupture, but Buñuel's attentiveness to the fetishized detail *within* the shot actually accentuates the break. Or, as he puts it more concretely, "It means the audience must pay attention to the time travel."[15]

By repeatedly calling attention to these objects, frequently in close-up (like those interactive "hot spots" on the giraffe), Buñuel shows how they become fetishized: "I like surprises to provoke laughter, and I've made much use of objects, and of the fetishism they inspire, to create a comic effect."[16] His use of fetishizing close-ups (like those of the chicken feet and washable rubber virgin in *Exterminating Angel*, or of the bare feet and high-heeled pumps in the opening sequence of *El*) is so powerful because he shows how this dynamic functions in the three interlocking realms of religion, sex, and consumerism—particularly as embodied in the rituals and relics of Catholicism, in Freud's linking of primary process thinking with the dynamics of erotic desire, and in Marx's theorizing of "commodity fetishism." What Buñuel also makes us see is how skillfully Hollywood melodrama mobilizes these fetishistic pleasures from all three realms. Even in the 1920s he acknowledged, "In a well-made film, the act of opening a door or seeing a hand—an enormous monster—pick up an object can encompass an authentic and novel beauty. It's always the same scenario that the Americans give us, and it's the one that always seems newest. A wonderful miracle of loaves and fishes!"[17] But if detached parts of the human body are fetishized, can the total objectification of characters and actors be far behind?

2. Avatars and Semi-Intelligent Agents

In cyberspace, intelligent agents are objects programmed with a repertoire of behavior that enables them to simulate human beings. In Buñuel's fictions, conversely, we frequently find semi-intelligent agents —human actors who are manipulated and objectified like puppets and whose behavior is not necessarily bound by consistency, psychology, or narrative logic. According to Buñuel,

> A movie actor is born, not made. A film, when all is said and done, is composed of segments, a remnant of poses which, taken as such, separately and arbitrarily, are utterly banal, divested of logical meaning, of psychology, of literary transcendence. In literature, a lion or an eagle can represent many things, but on the screen they are only two animals and nothing else.[18]

This approach to characterization (which is consistent with the Spanish literary tradition of *esperpento*[19]) in no way implies that Buñuel underestimated the crucial contribution of actors. It merely means that like Hitchcock he valued them as objects.[20] "Cinema acts directly upon the viewer in presenting concrete beings and things, isolating him in silence and darkness from what we might call his normal 'psychic habitat.'"[21] This view of characters and actors is also consistent with Michael Wood's point about the tormented, tormenting women played by Catherine Deneuve in *Tristana* and *Belle de jour*, whom we viewers must take an interactive role in imagining.[22]

Like the avatars in most electronic games, the characters in Buñuel's films are not unified three-dimensional characters with whom you can easily slip into a comfortably stable identification. Rather they confront us with their absurd inconsistencies (like the virginal valkyrie in *Exterminating Angel* or the laughing Jesus in *The Milky Way*) and violent contradictions (like the sympathetic would-be killer Archibaldo in *Ensayo de un crimen* and the deranged moral paragon Don Francisco in *El*), which in turn forces us to confront what is at stake in choosing such absurd avatars—as mobile phantoms to represent us, as fetishized icons to worship, or as obscure objects to desire. Buñuel exposes the power dynamics behind this casting system, which arbitrarily decides which woman will play servant or mistress in *Susanna* and *Diary of a Chambermaid*; or which prostitute will service the masochistic john in *Belle de jour*; or which actress will represent Conchita in *That Obscure Object of Desire*; and which actor the Commissioner of Police in *The Phantom of Liberty*, and which dope dealer the framing dreamer in *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*. This unpredictable casting extends even to the extras, whose database is occasionally invaded by Buñuel (a deviation unheard-of in electronic action games, where extras are usually anonymous enemies who can be shot on sight without guilt or regret), and also to a chain of offscreen narrators, whose incarnation (as in *Phantom*) can at any time be exposed.

Thus, as in most electronic fictions (but few movies), we clearly see that characters function not as individuals but as subject positions, which are defined by history, culture, and genre, and which are only temporarily occupied by individual players or actors chosen from a database by those in charge. Whereas most

game designers have commercial motives for this approach, Buñuel gives ideological reasons:

> The personal story, the private individual drama, cannot, in my opinion, interest anyone who is truly alive to his time; if the viewer participates in the joys, the sorrows, the anguish of a character on the screen, it can only be because he sees reflected in them the joys, sorrows, and anguish of society as a whole and, therefore, his own.[23]

This decentering of characters also applies to plots.

3. Narrative Fields and Desiring Machines

Instead of presenting coherent stories, Buñuel's most radical films create a narrative field with proliferating possibilities, which seem to be drawn (sometimes at random) from databases that are made to appear unlimited yet somehow still immanent in the text. Thus we are rarely concerned with how the story begins or ends, a choice which always seems rather arbitrary—not only in radical works from *Un Chien andalou* and *L'Age d'or* to *Phantom* and *That Obscure Object*, but also in Buñuel's most naturalistic film, *Los olvidados*. Framed by a pair of distopic databases, the film opens with a prologue in which the setting of Mexico City is literally plucked from a menu of urban misery (which also includes New York, London, and Paris), and it closes with the corpse of the young protagonist being dumped on a garbage heap that contains a random collection of refuse and other discarded *olvidados*.

In Buñuel's films (as in picaresque fiction), we focus not on beginnings or endings but on what Peter Brooks calls the "expansive middle . . . a field of force which we read *through*."[24] Although designed to confront interruptions, Buñuel's search engine is always a relentless desiring machine that drives us through this force field. This desiring machine evokes the one described by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* even more than those theorized by Brooks or Freud, for it is not restricted to the domestic realm of the patriarchal family, but is a mode of imagination that permits total freedom and is thereby capable of bringing down the entire bourgeois order.[25] Instead of solving who done it or other enigmas in the plot, Buñuel's search engine is concerned with revealing shocking connections within the narrative field while maintaining constant movement, a process which keeps both protagonists and readers alive.

One way Buñuel makes his force field so fascinating is by revealing the databases that underlie the plot. He projects his paradigm onto the syntagmatic plane—a strategy that both Román Jakobson and Roland Barthes saw as a form of semiotic transgression around which a great number of creative innovations are organized.[26] Instead of selecting one alternative from each database and then combining them to create a conventional linear narrative, Buñuel tends to string several alternatives from a single paradigm together as if to simulate a plot. Thus, we find multiple versions of an entrance or conversation in *Exterminating Angel*, or a full array of interrupted dinner parties and dreams in *The Discreet Charm*. Deleuze describes this phenomenon as a time-image, temporalizing the database structure:

> Subjecting the image to a power of repetition-variation was already Buñuel's contribution, and a way of setting time free, of reversing its subordination to movement. . . . *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* shows less a cycle of interrupted meals than different versions of the same meal in irreducible modes and worlds. . . . It is as if Buñuel's naturalist cosmology, based on the cycle and the succession of cycles, gives way to a plurality of simultaneous worlds; to a simultaneity of presents in different worlds.[27]

Buñuel repeatedly shows how this database narrative structure was already embedded in earlier forms, particularly within picaresque fiction. In a satiric road movie like *The Milky Way*, he imposes *an overarching journey*, which justifies the inclusion of the most incongruous assortment of characters, time frames, and settings plucked from his cherished database of heresies. In *Tristana*, he uses *the branching of forked paths*, where one road leads to violent action (the chase of a rabid dog) and the other to the milder genre of bourgeois romance where the heroine meets her future lover. In *The Discreet Charm*, he repeats *a single abstract trope*—six characters walking down the highway—in three slightly varied versions which, despite their lack of logical connection to any other scenes, serve as markers that divide the rest of the narrative into three discrete acts of approximately equal length.

In his final trilogy of films, we find not only the journey but an entire repertoire of tropes for the database narrative. In *Phantom*, we find *the country inn* (the traditional stopping place in picaresque fiction), where several rooms off the central hallway contain

In *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, the main characters are puppet-like avatars who are repeatedly seen strolling/scrolling through an open narrative field (above); and, like paper dolls, are repeatedly recast and redressed as elegant diners in a series of theatrical dinner-party dreams (left); and, like a pack of cards, eventually all fall down, ending as a heap of victims murdered by the Marseilles mob (below).

mini-stories and characters who compete for the narrative space. We also find the narrative trope of *the card game* embedded in one of the rooms, where one woman and four Dominican monks play poker, shuffling the cards into new syntagmatic combinations as they bet Medals, Virgins, and Sacred Hearts, which, like the religious orders, are reduced to paradigmatic suits. And in *The Discreet Charm*, we find *the menu* not only at the chain of interrupted dinner parties but also in the mixing and consuming of martinis, which helps delineate the classes, and at the tea room, where the shortage of beverages is compensated by the rich selection of musical instruments (including the fetishized cello). All of these frustrating menus are also enriched by a lavish array of inset incestuous dreams.

An Oneiric Conclusion

All three strategies I have described are characteristic of dreams, the ultimate model for interactive database narrative. For in dreams, we are nightly bombarded by a random firing of neural signals generated by the brain which the cerebral cortex must interpret. It performs this interpretive task by drawing selections from our internal databases of imagery, which contain virtually everything we have ever experienced and everything we have absorbed from our cultural dreampool, and we reshuffle these selections to generate new combinations that we narrativize when we awaken. We frequently interpret those stories as strategies of survival for ourselves, our culture, and our species—a death-defying narrative venture worthy of both Scheherazade and the Marquis de Sade, two of Buñuel's narrative heroes.

This perspective on dreams gives new resonance to one of the most frequently cited quotes by Buñuel:

> In the hands of a free spirit, the cinema is a magnificent and dangerous weapon. It is the best instrument through which to express the world of dreams, of emotions, of instinct. The mechanism that produces cinematic images is, among all forms of human expression, that which most closely resembles . . . the workings of the mind during sleep.[28]

And that's another reason why Buñuel's radical films, built on the database logic of dreams, provide such a magnificent legacy for conceptualizing interactive narratives and imbuing them with dangerous emotions, instinctual pleasures, and what appears to be an unending supply of unpredictable narrative twists. This perpetual procession of possibilities is held in reserve, like those millions of miniature Marists waiting for the meltdown, their unique moment of martyrdom in the searing Saharan light. Or, to put it more simply, like avatars moving toward hot spots in narrative fields forever.

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Notes

This article was drawn from the "Buñuel 2000" Centenary Conference, held at the University of London, 14-16 September 2000; it also appears in *"Buñuel 2000" Centenary Conference Proceedings*, forthcoming from the Institución Fernando el Católico, Zaragoza.

1. Linda Williams, *Figures of Desire: A Theory and Analysis of Surrealist Film* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1981); and Victor Fuentes, "The Discreet Charm of the Postmodern: Negotiating the Great Divide with the Ultimate Modernist, Luis Buñuel," in *Luis Buñuel's The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, ed. Marsha Kinder (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 82-98.
2. Susan Suleiman, "Freedom and Necessity: Narrative Structure in *The Phantom of Liberty*," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 3, no. 3 (Summer 1978): 277-96; and James Tobias, "Buñuel's Net Work: Performative Doubles in the Impossible Narrative of *The Phantom of Liberty*," *Film Quarterly*, vol. 52, no. 2 (Winter 1998-99): 10-22.
3. Jo Labanyi, "Buñuel's Cinematic Collaboration with Sáenz de Heredia, 1935-36," paper presented at the "Buñuel 2000" Centenary Conference.
4. "Pessimism," in *An Unspeakable Betrayal: Selected Writings of Luis Buñuel*, trans. Garrett White (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 258-63. Yet, in that same essay he acknowledged:
   > I still have a great admiration for American cinema, its actors, its sense of rhythm and action. Its filmmakers have handled with unique mastery a modern art that corresponds very well to the temperament of that people, perhaps because things technical play an essential role there. (259)
5. Agustín Sánchez Vidal, *Luis Buñuel* (Madrid: Editorial Cátedra, 1991), p. 25.
6. "A Giraffe," in *An Unspeakable Betrayal*, p. 44.
7. Ibid., pp. 44-48.
8. Andy Lippman, as quoted by Allucquère Rosanne Stone in *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), pp. 10-11.
9. For a discussion of *Pulp Fiction* as a database narrative, see my essay, "Violence American Style: The Narrative Orchestration of Violent Attractions," in *Violence and American Cinema*, ed. J. David Slocum (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 63-100.

10. Luis Buñuel, *My Last Sigh*, trans. Abigail Israel (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), p. 132.
11. "Cinema as an Instrument of Poetry," in *An Unspeakable Betrayal*, p. 136.
12. "Pessimism," p. 260.
13. Buñuel, as quoted by José De la Colina and Tomás Pérez Turrent in *Objects of Desire: Conversations with Luis Buñuel* (1986), ed. and trans. Paul Lenti (New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1992), p. 22.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., p. 194.
16. "Pessimism," p. 260.
17. "Variations on Adolphe Menjou's Mustache" (1928), in *An Unspeakable Betrayal*, pp. 114-15.
18. Ibid., p. 114.
19. According to John Hopewell,

    > Characters in Valle-Inclán's esperpento grimace, gesture, grunt, performing mechanically like human marionettes. They are swept along by a tide of misunderstandings, imbecility, chaos. They struggle to transcend the crippling biological, social, psychological and accidental banality of life in general, their present predicament in particular. They fail.

    Out of the Past: Spanish Cinema after Franco (London: British Film Institute, 1986), p. 59.
20. In a recent documentary entitled *Regarding Buñuel* (*A propósito de Buñuel*, 2000), after being told that Hitchcock used to refer to his actors as cattle, Buñuel laughingly responds, "No, they are *cucarachas* [cockroaches]!"
21. "Cinema as an Instrument of Poetry," p. 137.
22. Michael Wood, "Tormentors and Tormented: Buñuel's Women," a paper presented at the "Buñuel 2000" Centenary Conference.
23. "Cinema as an Instrument of Poetry," p. 138.
24. "We can . . . conceive of the reading of plot as a form of desire that carries us forward, onward, through the text. . . . In the motors and engines I have glanced at, including Eros as motor and motor as erotic, we find representations of the dynamics of the narrative text, connecting the beginning and end across the middle and making of that middle—what we read *through*—a field of force." Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Vintage, 1984), pp. 22, 37, 47.
25. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972), trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (New York: Viking Press, 1977).
26. Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* and *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), p. 86.
27. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1985), trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 102-3.
28. "Cinema as an Instrument of Poetry," pp. 138-39.

Jean-Pierre Geuens

The Digital World Picture

Not so long ago many of us were still denying what today is a certainty: the demise of film and its replacement by digital technology. Of course we grudgingly recognized that the new medium made editing faster and more exciting, sound recording more malleable to postproduction changes, and visual effects simply astounding, but somehow we still held firm to the notion that the rich texture and the shading palette of the film image could never be overtaken. No longer so: it is now clear that, under the relentless drive of George Lucas and some leading electronic firms, all remaining "film" aspects of cinema, from the origination of the material to its projection in theaters, will soon be propelled into the digital age—ready or not, and sooner rather than later.[1] However, the final triumph of the new technology should not be perceived as anything more than icing on the cake. For all practical purposes, the revolution is already upon us, and we should therefore not shy away from discussion—wild speculation, even—about its impact on the art of cinema.

Certainly the literature associated with the movie industry constantly deluges us with thousands of pages in which we are told of digital breakthroughs that push the envelope further and further.[2] At the same time though, what is said is carefully couched so as not to frighten those who fear being left behind.[3] In *American Cinematographer*, for instance, Lucas himself goes out of his way to reassure cameramen that "aesthetic decisions still have to be made" and "that the essence of what they do—which is to frame a shot and to make sure the lighting is beautiful or appropriate—will always remain the same."[4] Rather than making the members of the technical crew redundant or displacing a part or all of their labor onto a new set of workers operating exclusively behind computers, the new technology is generally presented as just another tool that will, in the end, enhance the creative control of all the parties concerned. Sure, things will be done somewhat differently in the future, but good people will be able to adjust themselves to the changes and easily reposition their skills within the new paradigm.

In my judgment, this view severely understates the radical discontinuity at the core of the digital revolution, insofar as it has it in its power to shatter the long-standing arrangements that regulate how movies come into being. As for theorists, they have been slow to challenge the industry's steady-as-she-goes message, mainly because they have been absorbed by flashier aspects of the technological takeover, and especially everything related to the hypertext.[5] So here I hope to determine the ways by which digital moviemaking changes the rules of the game. I will then attack what I perceive to be the nihilistic tendencies of the new medium; and I will conclude by bringing to light a different use of the technology—one that might take us back from the abyss. In any event, what is presently going on in the field is already shaking our very understanding of what a "film" is.

Changing the Rules of the Game

In "The Question Concerning Technology," Martin Heidegger's main argument is that "technology is no mere means" but rather "a way of revealing" what we then take to be the world.[6] By this Heidegger is suggesting that the kind of technology we use circumscribes our view of the world, earmarking our access to it, ultimately shaping what we make of it. On a lesser scale, it follows that different means of production are not interchangeable either, that new empowering devices do not simply provide a better, more efficient way of doing the same thing. On the contrary, each interjects a distinct filter, an engineered mediation that regulates the labor of those who use it. At the same

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