

# The Shipwreck on *Calle de la Providencia*: Buñuel as the Exterminator.

## El naufragio de la *Calle de la Providencia*. Buñuel, el exterminador.



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### Abstract.

This article analyzes how Luis Buñuel portrays the anomie, alienation and moral decadence of the Mexican bourgeoisie of the 1960s and early 1970s. It focuses on *El ángel exterminador* (1962), establishing thematic links with *El discreto encanto de la burguesía* (1972). Both films show bourgeois characters disconnected from their environment, trapped in empty routines, and alienated from an authentic life. The essay employs a comparative analysis that examines narrative, symbolic and visual elements, highlighting the use of the absurd, surrealism and borderline situations - such as the passage of time, the dreamlike, repressed desire or double standards- to highlight the contradictions of this social class. Buñuel uses these resources to represent the existential collapse of his characters: in *El ángel exterminador*, the physical confinement of the guests reflects their vital stagnation; in *El discreto encanto...*, the constant interruption of dinner symbolizes the impossibility of consummating a true purpose. Taken together, both works denounce the hypocrisy, superficiality and chaos of a bourgeoisie that, instead of renewing itself, sinks into its own farce.

**Keywords:** Bourgeoisie. Luis Buñuel. Surrealism. Time. *The exterminating angel*. Suspension of meaning.

### Resumen.

Este artículo analiza cómo Luis Buñuel retrata la anomia, alienación y decadencia moral de la burguesía mexicana de los años 60 y principios de los 70. Se centra en *El*

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*ángel exterminador* (1962), estableciendo vínculos temáticos con *El discreto encanto de la burguesía* (1972). Ambos filmes muestran a personajes burgueses desconectados de su entorno, atrapados en rutinas vacías, y ajenos a una vida auténtica. El ensayo emplea un análisis comparativo que examina elementos narrativos, simbólicos y visuales, destacando el uso del absurdo, el surrealismo y situaciones límite —como el paso del tiempo, lo onírico, el deseo reprimido o la doble moral— para evidenciar las contradicciones de esta clase social. Buñuel utiliza estos recursos para representar el colapso existencial de sus personajes: en *El ángel exterminador*, el encierro físico de los invitados refleja su estancamiento vital; en *El discreto encanto...*, la constante interrupción de la cena simboliza la imposibilidad de consumir un propósito verdadero. En conjunto, ambas obras denuncian la hipocresía, superficialidad y caos de una burguesía que, en vez de renovarse, se hunde en su propia farsa.

**Palabras clave:** Burguesía. Luis Buñuel. Surrealismo. Tiempo. *El ángel exterminador*. Suspensión del sentido.

*"Let us educate ourselves, let us cultivate ourselves, let us all become university students, and we will stop killing each other".*

Luis Buñuel

*"I had the good fortune to spend my childhood in the Middle Ages, that 'painful and exquisite' time, as Huysmans says."*

Luis Buñuel

## Introduction

The suspension of meaning is usually the sign of some of Luis Buñuel Portolés' (Calanda, Teruel, 1920 - Mexico City, 1983) most renowned films, at least the ones that will be considered here. The temporal and spatial coordinates are blurred in order to show, among other things, the ease with which the human being can feel lost in the face of the unknown, beyond the natural bewilderment and uncertainty, which could be considered normal to a certain extent, precisely because it is the unknown-unknown. But what happens when a person feels spatiotemporally disoriented before situations in which he or she would not have to suffer from "existential vertigo" or "cosmic uncertainty", as happens with characters that we observe in *El ángel exterminador* (1962)? Jean Epstein —whom Buñuel greatly admired, with whom he worked and always maintained an important series of coincidences,

besides receiving from the latter intellectual influences that are appreciated in his cinematographic work—, considers that.

In any case, the location or spatio-temporal relation plays a preponderant role in the combination that constitutes the current notion of reality. This of course, such localization has in itself nothing substantial; it is purely metaphysical and profoundly imprints such a character on every conception of the real. It is increasingly recognized today that no subtle localization can be established except as more or less probable (Epstein, 1960, p.139).

In the latter case, perhaps we would be speaking of meaning being suspended before the known-unknown...insofar as it becomes known again, recognizing itself. Meanwhile, this suspension of meaning does not leave immune the capacity of judgment, nor the faculty of naming, much less "the history of personal instincts" that each individual carries with him both phylogenetically and ontogenetically, nor the way in which human passions -like Penthesilea accompanied by "The Furies"- burst in, collapsing every barrier of conscious repression, showing not only our fragile vulnerability but at the same time, the profound incapacity to face them effectively and favorably. Pedro Poyato affirms that:

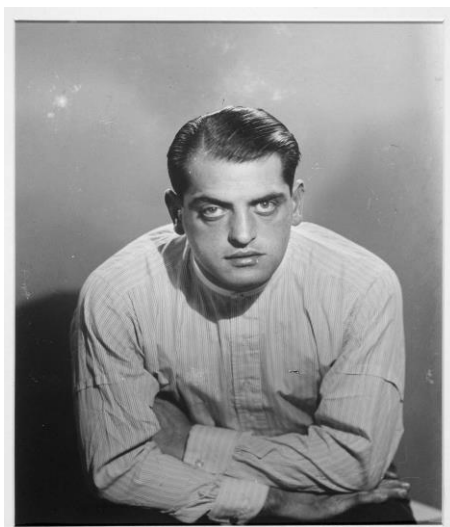
In *El ángel exterminador*, the event and its repetition take place in the present tense, as made explicit by the movements and waiting of the maids. This leads to an impossible temporal coexistence: the insertion of something already past as if it were present. And so, instead of marking the separation "past/present", as classical and mannerist stories do, Buñuel's text dissolves this signifying bar for the sake of establishing a new dialectic between both temporal levels. *El ángel exterminador* thus attacks the institutional narrative, fracturing its temporal dimension according to a procedure that, in accordance with the effect of meaning produced, we can call surrealist; a procedure that is therefore nothing more than a new variant of those already worked by Buñuel in *Un perro andaluz* (1929).<sup>1</sup> In any case, this repetition,

<sup>1</sup> See Juan A. Mancebo R. (2022). "Between an 'Andalusian Dog' and 'Las Hurdes', 'Land Without Bread'. Subversion and utopia in Luis Buñuel (1917-1933)". In *La aventura de la modernidad. The twenties in Spain*. Ramón V. Díaz del Campo and Juan S. Pérez G. (Coords.). Madrid: Catarata, pp.237-248.

this double entry of the guests into the lobby led by the host, constitutes, together with the series of repetitions that follow, one of the greatest challenges to reason and logic, referred in this case to the temporal dimension of the story, in all of Buñuel's cinema (2011, p.8).<sup>2</sup>

If we consider what has been mentioned so far, together with the culture, the context and the falsehood on and around which personality, identity and common sense have been built, the challenges to reason and logic mentioned by Poyato in the previous quote, season and season this suspension and the suspended. The reactions rather than the answers that derive from this can be the most unpredictable, to the extent of not being able to recognize themselves neither in the acts nor in the facts, opting for oblivion rather than for justification and less for exculpatory reconstruction, defrauding themselves -and the others-, since the others have probably already done the same with themselves and with the others, being the worst of the case: the iteration without replacement and the uncertain and always threatening repetition of indeterminacy.

**Image 1:** File photo "Luis Buñuel".



Source: [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org)

<sup>2</sup> See Deleuze, Gilles (1996). *La imagen-tiempo. Estudios sobre cine 2*. Barcelona: Paidós.

### Luis Buñuel and his cinematographic imagination

Just in 1921 Luis Buñuel visited Toledo for the first time, a city that would mark him and his closest friends for life, for whom he would be an important influence and vice versa, since many of them would drink at the time in the most important international trends of thought and art, showing a significant interest in Dadaism, the work of Louis Aragon and André Breton, as well as -Buñuel in particular- in psychoanalysis, especially Freud, allowing Aragon to build bridges of communication and elective affinities to carry out his creative process. That is, to show what he wanted to show - "the unknown" unknown - in the way he considered he best could and should. His total immersion in the depths of the seventh art occurred after seeing the film "The Three Lights" (*Der müde Tod*) (1921), by Fritz Lang. Weeks later he would be presented with a filming of the French director Jean Epstein, in which he would work as assistant director in the silent film "Mauprat" (1926), also translated into Spanish as "A la fuerza se ama", and "La caída de la casa Usher" (*La chute de la maison Usher*) (1928).

Buñuel, naturalized Mexican after his exile during the Spanish Civil War, delves into the innermost recesses of the human mind to delineate and outline his characters, until he finds and delves into the most hidden and darkest parts of their thoughts. Buñuel's motifs and themes jump from one work to another, so it is not easy to establish communicating vessels between his works, being the criticism of the bourgeoisie and its lifestyle (way of life), the repression of sexual desire, on the one hand, and the images and dreamlike representations mounted on the screen *leitmotif*, fundamental parts of the filmmaker's work, on the other hand. *El ángel exterminador* (1962) -the film to which we will devote special attention in this paper- is particularly striking due to the thematic-discursive intertextuality it maintains with other of his films such as *El discreto encanto de la burguesía* (1972) and *Ese oscuro objeto del deseo* (1977), among others.

To talk about Luis Buñuel as a filmmaker it is necessary to place ourselves in the 1920s, when the avant-garde<sup>3</sup> and especially the surrealist movement had a significant impact on our author and his closest friends, who at least at that time of his youth influenced and involved each other. It is important to mention that along with the artistic movements—which were hardly limited to exist within the fields of aesthetics and creation—neither fascism nor totalitarianism left European societies in general, nor Spain in particular, immune.<sup>4</sup> Some of Buñuel's most distinguished friends were Salvador Dalí and Federico García Lorca. Gala Candelas comments that

Lorca, Dalí and Buñuel were part of the avant-garde movement in Madrid in the 1920s. While their artistic spirit led them to explore and experiment with different modes of expression, often of a controversial nature, the moral and religious rigidity of their upbringing imposed obstacles to their desire for freedom. An analysis of some representative examples of the artistic production of these authors during this period shows the importance of parody as a resource to criticize the repression of social institutions and to give voice to personal desire (1999-2000, p.470).<sup>5</sup>

These three authors ultimately followed different paths. García Lorca was assassinated by Franco's fascist regime. Dalí insisted on staying in Europe, particularly in Paris. And Luis Buñuel, as we know, was exiled from fascist persecution, initially in France and later in

<sup>3</sup> See Vicente Sánchez-Biosca. "El cine y su imaginario en la vanguardia española". In Javier Pérez Bazo (ed.) (1998). *La vanguardia en España. Art and literature*. Toulouse: Cr1c & Ophrys. See Victor Fuentes (1989). *Buñuel, cine y literatura*. Barcelona: Salvat.

<sup>4</sup> See Claudia Tame Domínguez. "Luis Buñuel. Entre el surrealismo y la política." In Fernando Huesca Ramón and Claudia Tame Domínguez (Comps.) (2016). *Contemporary political reflections in the disciplinary margins*. Puebla: Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, pp.111-118.

<sup>5</sup> See Luis Buñuel (1978). "Notes on the Making of *Un chien andalou*," *The World of Luis Buñuel. Essays in Criticism*, in Joan Mellen (ed.). New York: Oxford University Press, pp.151-153. See Luis Buñuel (1978). "Poetry and Cinema." *The World of Luis Buñuel. Essays in Criticism*. in Joan Mellen (ed.), New York: Oxford University Press, pp.105-110. See Francisco Aranda (1969). *Luis Buñuel, biografía crítica*. Barcelona: Lumen. See Agustín Sánchez Vidal (1996). *Buñuel, Lorca, Dalí: el enigma sin fin*. Barcelona: Planeta. See Luis Buñuel (2012). *Mi último suspiro*. Madrid: Debolsillo. See Fernando del Diego, et.al., (2000-2015). *Buñuel, 100 años (Entrevistas)*. Barcelona: Centro Virtual Cervantes. See Virginia Higginbotham (1979). *Luis Buñuel*. Boston: Twayne Publishers. See Max Aub (1985). *Conversations with Luis Buñuel*. Madrid: Aguilar.



Mexico.<sup>6</sup> All three of them, however, coincided in making their work their life, in making reality according to their desire through art, and their legacy is alive and throbbing to this day.

*El ángel exterminador* is a film that can be classified in general terms as surrealist,<sup>7</sup> produced in Mexico by Gustavo Alatríste and starring Silvia Pinal, then the producer's wife, Enrique Rambal and Claudio Brook. It was made just a year after *Viridiana* (1961) became an international hit, premiering in Mexico City on September 22, 1962. In the first of these films, the characters' expectations are always frustrated every time they try to have an evening rendezvous; while in the second, the protagonist never succeeds in satisfying his sexual desires.

As for the first two films mentioned in this work, the characters (the couples) attending the organized event all seem to be cut from the same cloth and under the same line: that of the bourgeoisie. The gala dress, the empty and overwhelming pedantic speech, perhaps full of data recently learned for the occasion, superfluous and ankylosing, disinterested for the outsider and surplus for the listener. His walk, his gestures, his 'delicacy' in taking the glass, pushing it to his mouth and tasting the brew, accompanied by the appropriate and rectified etiquette words, thus memorized for the occasion that will be neither the first nor the last, if not always the same one over and over again.

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<sup>6</sup> According to Tomás Pérez Turrent (2001) "When Luis Buñuel arrived in Mexico he was no stranger: he already had an enviable and at the same time heavy history of celebrity and scandal, but also an even heavier silence: his last film had been made in 1932, fourteen years earlier, eight of which he had spent in the United States dedicated to obscure tasks, almost all bureaucratic, related to cinema. He came to Mexico to direct films, which meant a clean slate: a new beginning in which - sad as it was - he had to forget everything that had happened to him in relation to cinema". *The Mexican cinema of Luis Buñuel*. *Obsesión Buñuel*. Madrid: Filmoteca Española. See Tomás Pérez Turrent (1972), *Buñuel ante el cine mexicano*. *Revista de la Universidad de México*. June, 1972, Mexico City: UNAM, pp.5-9.

<sup>7</sup> On Buñuel's relationship with the surrealist movement and Salvador Dalí during his youth, see Joan M. Minguet (n.d.). "Dalí, Buñuel y el cine surrealista". *Arte contemporáneo*. Barcelona: Cervantes Virtual Center. See Alain and Odette Virmaux (1976). *Les surréalistes et le cinema*. Paris: Seghers.

Image 2: Poster of the film "The Exterminating Angel" (1962)



Source: [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org)

In *El ángel exterminador* we find that, after attending an operatic event, a group of friends and guests decide to follow the Nóbile family to a dinner party at their mansion on Providence Street. From the first scenes of the film, strange behaviors of the domestic employees can be observed as the guests make their appearance. Later, for one reason or another, all the domestic servants are suddenly forced to leave the house. The dinner takes place in a few scenes until the guests realize that it is not possible for them to leave the room in which they are distributed conversing, due to some reason that is totally unknown to them; there is nothing to prevent them from leaving, but none of them feels able to try.

Luis Buñuel in the making of this film, one of the most political films he made, affirmed in a series of interviews carried out between 1975 and 1977, Tomás Pérez Turrent (T.P.T.) and José de la Colina (J.C.) together with the Aragonese filmmaker, Tomas Pérez Turrent (T.P.T.) and José de la Colina (J.C.) together with the Aragonese director, which gave rise to a book entitled *Buñuel por Buñuel*, and whose chapter XX is called *El ángel*



*exterminador*, that the script and the dialogues were his creation and that the text was based on the cinegram he had written 5 years ago with Luis Alcoriza, entitled "Los naufragos de la calle Providencia". It can be confirmed that Buñuel modified and extended the script, originally conceived to make a short film, changing the title. Here is part of that interview:

*Buñuel*: Nothing like that. The only thing that is Bergamín's in the whole film doesn't even cover one line: it's the title. In Madrid, when I went there to make *Viridiana*, Bergamín and I met in a "peña" to which many people came: bullfighters, writers, film people. One day, Bergamín told me that he intended to write a play with the title *El ángel exterminador* (*The Exterminating Angel*). This comes from the Bible, from the Apocalypse, but also the members of a Spanish association, the Apostolics of 1828, and I think a group of Mormons gave themselves that name. I said to Bergamín: "It is a magnificent title. If I go down the street and see that title announced, I go in to see the show." Bergamín never wrote the play. Shortly afterwards, Alcoriza and I wrote a script called *Los naufragos de la calle Providencia*. The starting point was a story that had occurred to me around the year 40, in New York, together with four or five others, among them what would later become *Simón del Desierto* (1965) and the episode of the "kidnapped" girl that would later include in *El fantasma de la libertad* (1974). *Los naufragos de la calle Providencia* was a long and literary title: I did not like it. I thought of Bergamín's title and wrote to him asking him for the rights to the title, and he replied that I didn't need to ask for them, since those words appeared in the Apocalypse.

*T.P.T.*: At that time it would have been difficult to make the film with a producer other than Gustavo Alatríste. They would not have accepted a story like that.

*Buñuel*: That's true. Or perhaps he would have made it with less freedom. The ideal, of course, would have been to make it in England, in a place where there really is a "high society" style. But, on the other hand, with Alatríste I had all the freedom in the world. He didn't suppress anything, he didn't tell me to put this or that. I didn't even know the plot: all I told him was that it was about some people who can't leave, inexplicably, a room. "Go ahead," he told me, "make it however you want." If I didn't get any further it was because I self-censored. Now I would do it better.

*J. de la C.*: In what way?

Buñuel: I would leave the characters locked up for a month until they reach cannibalism, a fight to the death, to show that perhaps aggressiveness is innate.

*J. de la C.*: *The exterminating angel* would be inside each character ... Of all of us.

Buñuel: I first thought that the title had a subterranean relationship with the plot, although I didn't know which one. With hindsight I interpreted it like this: in today's human society, men are less and less in agreement, and that's why they fight each other. But why don't they understand each other, why don't they get out of this situation? In the film it's the same thing: Why don't they find a solution together to get out of the room?

*J. de la C.*: I find a certain relationship with the theme of *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* ...

*Buñuel*: In another way, it's the same thing: not being able to do something, although in principle it could be done.

*T.P.T.*: There is also the theme of the repetition of certain acts (1993, pp.224-225).

Time in *El ángel exterminador* is the time of ostracism, the time of sleep,<sup>8</sup> the one that softly and slowly -bergsonianly- dilutes into space, the space of waste, of luxury, of interest that the aristocrat, bourgeois or plutocrat does not cease to accumulate at all times while having fun and doing everything possible in every gesture, so that the difference is noticed in front of the equal, the backward, what is not and cannot be where he or she breathes and ventosean. It is a subjective temporality that is detached from objective time, the latter framed in the line of progress, in the chronological accumulation of waste, of the ill-gotten and wasted, the life of the 'lost fund' and speculation, typical of the bourgeois class that we observe both in *The Exterminating Angel* and in *The Discreet Charm of the bourgeoisie*. A Time that only meets time when the physiological clock; that which in principle works

<sup>8</sup> See Sigmund Freud (1957). "A Metapsychological Supplement to the Theory of Dreams". *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIV. London: Hogarth Press, pp.217-235.

"naturally" for everyone equally; knows how to distinguish between priorities and procrastination; *elite* time in which the bursatilization of life takes place.

Returning to the work of interviews jointly conducted by Tomás Pérez Turrent (T.P.T.) and José de la Colina (J.C.), in which they comment with Buñuel in the chapter dedicated to the film *El ángel exterminador*, we find extremely interesting reflections on time, the behaviors of the prototypical characters of the bourgeoisie of the time and repetition. We read:

*T.P.T.:* In *El ángel exterminador* time is very slow, a subjective time. The greater the concentration of confinement, of space, the greater the dilation of time.

*Buñuel:* While the confinement and the discomfort last, time is like an eternity. In cinema, time and space are flexible, they obey the director. In this film, as soon as the characters are locked up, it's as if there were no more time. How long are they in there? Ten minutes, ten days, ten years? You don't know. They are in another time. That's why there are repetitions:<sup>9</sup> is not time as a line.

*J. de la C.:* Everything is very physical: hunger, thirst ...

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<sup>9</sup> The repetitions of which Buñuel speaks as well as the intertextualities that abound in his cinematography are an important constant, a narrative resource that, as well as the intertextuality to which Buñuel himself refers in his filmography and in the interview to which we allude on several occasions in this work, play an equally important role, always in relation to the use made of subjective time (of the story) with respect to objective time (historical-chronological). With regard to *El ángel exterminador*, Carlos Barbáchano considers that "the film is not only based on the unusualness of the situation, but also on the important dramatic function that the modern resource of repetition acquires in it. Repetitions -there are about twenty in the whole film- that affect, time and again, the absurd and mechanical social customs of our era of development" (1989, p. 170). In the same vein, Agustín Sánchez Vidal writes that:

As for repetitions [Buñuel] has declared that he has always felt very attracted to them, and the hypnotic effect they produce, declaring, proudly, that in *El ángel exterminador* there are, at least, a dozen repetitions, and that he was the first who had employed them in cinema; a statement that should be qualified, since -to cite two earlier examples- in *October* (1927) Eisenstein shows Kerensky repeatedly climbing the same stairs, just as Léger (1924) shows a woman in *Ballet mécanique*. (1991, p. 237).

For Pedro Poyato, "... it is undoubtedly the repetition that most reiteratively suspends the sense of the film. Even though it had been previously rehearsed in some of Buñuel's earlier works, such as *Ensayo de un crimen* (1955), it is in *El ángel exterminador* where repetition finds its definitive consolidation, to the point of becoming one of the structural features of the film" (2011, p. 5).

*Buñuel*: ... the dishevelment, the illness, the sweat, the beard that grows, the garbage that accumulates.

*J. de la C.*: It is the intensely materialistic side of the film. These characters, who produce nothing, run the risk of drowning in their own waste and detritus. Everything has begun to degrade. The servants have left, that is to say that the truly productive forces have ceased to supply the consumer classes with the means of life. There is also a side of Marxist parable.

*Buñuel*: Well, it may be very Marxist, as you say, but the fact is that it is not shown in the Soviet Union. Of course, there may be a Marxist interpretation of the argument: bourgeois society no longer has a historical engine, it is stagnant in itself, it has lost its creative capacity... It may be, without my having thought it a priori.

*T.P.T.*: And the final charge, when the characters are locked up in the church again? Is it the revolution?<sup>10</sup>

*Buñuel*: No. It's police repression: the cavalry attacks some demonstrators. Why? I don't know: it's an image that comes back to my memory. It is also in *Tristana* (1970) and in a certain way at the end of *The Phantom of Liberty* (1974). They are memories of Zaragoza, as I have already told you. Perhaps, in *El ángel exterminador* the police charge is not related to the confinement in the church, and they are two coincidental events by chance. But I did not feel the image in any other way, but like this: the façade of the church, shots, screams, the lambs entering the temple. If the critics can't think of a better explanation, they might say that I like chaotic situations, that I am an anarchist (laughs) (1993:233-234).

Regarding the way in which cinematographic time can or does run, and which is related to what we observe in *El ángel exterminador* (1962), Jean Epstein, a French film theorist and

<sup>10</sup> See Román Gubern and Paul Hammond (2009). *Los años rojos de Luis Buñuel*. Madrid: Cátedra.

director of Polish origin, speaking about a time that seems not to pass, which he calls "timeless time" and which we consider to be closely related to the way in which time occurs in Buñuel's film, affirms that [this time]

It imposes its own number of days and nights in such a tyrannical way that, even though this calculation is faulty, it cannot be changed and the continual readjustment of calendars is necessary. Undoubtedly, at times, an hour of boredom seems to pass more slowly than a pleasant hour, but these always confusing and often contradictory impressions do not manage to break the faith in the unalterable fixity of the universal rhythm. Belief confirmed even by the irreversibility of time, invariably positive, image of the irreversible constancy of astronomical movements, while space, in longitude, latitude and depth, can be traversed and measured, either in one direction or in the opposite. Thus, without the invention of cinematographic acceleration and *slowing down*, it seemed impossible - and not even dreamable - to see a year of a plant's life condensed into ten minutes, or thirty seconds of an athlete's action growing and extending for two minutes (1960, p.36).

We observe in the film that when the weariness of the internment in the mansion reaches its maximum expression, and the superfluity has already exhausted all the artifices of deception, of the intellectual marasmus, the abulia becomes present in an uninterrupted <<succession>> of presents, making an uninterrupted <<succession>>. uninterrupted succession of presents, making of each character a deformed St. Jerome, not by melancholy nor surrounded by a sleeping dog or lion and its measuring instruments, but by the bourgeois disease that resembles the wakefulness and hibernation of the bear, the mediocrity translated into fear and cowardice of the lambs in herd following the one who overtakes it without object or definite destination or will. Time seems to stop or to enter a timeline of discontinuity that gives continuity.

Epstein states that:

[...] one guesses then that this cinematographic continuum and discontinuum are in reality as nonexistent one as the other or, what essentially turns out to be the same, that the continuum and the discontinuum take alternatively the role of object and



that of concept, since their reality is nothing more than a function in which they can substitute for each other" (1960, p. 26).

By virtue of the above, reality becomes a reality of unrealities (surreal), and time merges into a relationship with space, just as it occurs in the dream world, in which:

[...] the film camera, by fragmenting the continuity of a character's gestures, has cut out a discontinuous image which, because of its own discontinuity is false, and which will only rediscover its truth on condition that it is reintegrated, in the projection, into its original continuity. (1960, p.27).

**Image 3:** Still from "The Exterminating Angel" (1962)



Source: [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org)

We observe in the film sequences in which, in accordance with the abulic and bored behavior of the characters, neither time seems to be time, nor space, space. Therefore that the life of the characters becomes a sort of game in which time disposes of them; it subjects them to its will. This is the result of a narrative resource masterfully constructed by Buñuel, which, according to Epstein, is due in large part to the fact that



The cinematograph has destroyed this illusion: it shows that time is nothing more than a perspective born of the succession of phenomena, just as space is nothing more than a perspective of the coexistence of things. Time contains nothing that can be called time in itself, nor does space enclose anything of space in itself. They are composed, both the one and the other, of nothing but essentially variable relations, between appearances that occur successively or simultaneously (1960, p.41).

In other words, according to Epstein: "The cinematograph invites us to reconsider the principle of causality" (1960, p. 73). In *El ángel exterminador* (1962) the space<sup>11</sup> on the screen seems to be always the same taken from different angles and perspectives, to show in chiaroscuro the most sinister profiles of the guests. Not only the open (objective) shots where all the characters or several of them can be seen maneuvering under the baroque light that shelters them and makes them sisters, but also the subjective shots that start from the very look of the one who is captured by the camera while addressing someone or something else (inside or outside the frame) to express his mood or discouragement before the events that take place on the screen.

They hatch loneliness and isolation, empty language and the meaninglessness of the superfluous life that is accompanied by the masking of the real and the other masks underneath, which only serve as a basis for any social relationship that is established from there, in the nullity, all this working largely intertextually with the other film to which we have alluded: *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972).

<sup>11</sup> On architectural space in this film by Buñuel and in general in Buñuel's work, see José Enrique Mora Díez. "La concepción del espacio arquitectónico en el cine de Luis Buñuel". Publication of the *Camón Aznar Museum and Institute of Ibercaja*, Zaragoza, no. XCV, 2005, pp.265-288.

Image 4: Still from "The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie" (1972).



Source: [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org)

To close this part concerning time in *El ángel exterminador* (1962), we quote again Epstein, who affirms that

The cinematograph. It differs from simply optical apparatus, in the first place, because it provides reports from the outside concerning two different senses; in the second place -and, above all

secondly - and, above all - because it presents these bisensory data already arranged by it according to certain rhythms of succession. The cinematograph is a witness that retraces not only a spatial but also a temporal image of sensible reality; that associates its representations in an architecture whose relief supposes the synthesis of two intellectual categories: that of extension and that of time. Synthesis in which the third category appears almost automatically: causality. Because of this power to effect diverse combinations - even if it is purely mechanical - the cinematograph proves to be something more than the instrument of replacement or extension of one or even several organs of the senses (1960, pp.95-96).

### The bourgeois *ethos* and its sociohistorical context in *The Exterminating Angel*

The film *El ángel exterminador* (1962), is set and conceived as a critique of the Mexican bourgeoisie of the mid-twentieth century, in a historical context that encompasses mainly the decades of the 1940s and 1950s. Although it was made in the 1960s, the work reflects a society that was still deeply marked by the power dynamics, customs and privileges of the economic and social elite of the previous decades. These decades coincided with the period known as the "Mexican miracle", a time of sustained economic growth and political stability under the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) regime. During this period, a bourgeoisie emerged that benefited from industrial development and state policies, but was also perceived as superficial, morally empty and disconnected from the reality of the popular classes. Buñuel uses the absurd and irrational confinement of the characters in the film as a metaphor for the inability of this social class to confront its own limitations, hypocrisies and the rigidity of its values. Therefore, although the film was shot in the 1960s, it criticizes a sociopolitical and cultural context that developed in previous decades and that was still current in Mexican society at the time.

We have in the background the rise of the bourgeoisie, a characteristic related to the nouveau riche brought -not precisely by railroads- by the post-revolutionary governments and 'Germanism' in Mexico. The taste for the European, but above all for the Europeanizing. A different Mexico that believed it was opening the way to the world of Modernity and the 'International Concert of Nations', when in reality it was being "opened" by the consumer society and the needs of <<Uncle Sam>>, who after having been involved in the great conflagration of the middle of the last century came out victorious. In addition to the above, the European avant-garde played a very important role in the social imaginary, as already mentioned, of which Buñuel himself was a product at launch (voluntary exile and forced at the same time by the civil war in Spain and the Great War) and at the same time the bearer

of the good news, not necessarily as something better, but different, among which were the socialist revolution, surrealism<sup>12</sup> and psychoanalysis.

Returning to *The Exterminating Angel*, emotions, despair, abulia and desire surface, they can no longer hide in the despair of not knowing what it is that keeps them there confined without being able to leave the mansion. Perhaps leaving through the same door through which they entered would be enough, but no one seems to think of such a far-fetched idea. Tear down the house, break the walls to get out. Tear down a wall, bore through a pipe to quench their thirst. Take shelter from a bear and slaughter sheep to quench your hunger. In the interviews to which we have already alluded, Tomás Pérez Turrent and José de la Colina, in agreement with Luis Buñuel, comment on the most dreamlike, symbolic and surreal scenes that appear in *El ángel exterminador*, such as those in which bears and lambs appear. Here is an excerpt:

*Buñuel*: It's true ... There is another thing I want to tell you so that you can see how symbols are arbitrarily attributed to me. I was filming *The Exterminating Angel*, it was six o'clock in the evening and at seven o'clock I had to make the cut. I couldn't think of anything, but I couldn't waste an hour either. I told Nobile to sit next to a lamb tied to the piano leg, I handed him a knife and asked Silvia to sit next to Nobile. And I couldn't think of anything else and seven o'clock came. The next day I could continue with another scene, but the location and lighting had to be changed. It occurred to me that Silvia should bandage the lamb's eyes with a handkerchief and give the dagger to Nobile. That's how it turned out. All improvised, without thinking that the objects were symbols. A good symbol of nothing. In spite of that, some critics made several interpretations. The lamb, i.e. Christianity; the knife, blasphemy ...<sup>13</sup> And there was nothing like that, everything was arbitrary, it was just to provoke some uneasiness ...

<sup>12</sup> See Julian Matthews (1971). *Surrealism and Film*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press. See Raquel Tibol (2014). "Buñuel and Remedios Varo. Two moments of surrealism in Mexico". ENDEBATE. Published in La Jornada, September 29, 2013. <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2013/09/29/opinion/a03a1cul> and <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2013/10/06/cultura/a03a1cul>.

<sup>13</sup> See Víctor Fuentes. "Pulsiones y perversiones en el cine de Buñuel y en el de Almodóvar". *Turia: Revista cultural*, Nº 76, 2005, pp.192-209.

*J. de la C.*: I also remember another "symbol interpretation". A critic from here, from Mexico, upon seeing the bear that runs along the staircase and the corridor above, said that it symbolized "the Soviet threat". On the other hand, the *Positif* critic who commented on the film, referring to the scene in which Nobile's wife invites her lover to go and see the incunabula, heard or read "incurable" and thought that it was about a dying man and that this dying man, of course, was the bourgeois world itself.

Buñuel: I did not know this. About the bear, yes. The bear was "the Soviet Union that had the bourgeoisie under siege", and thus the film was encyclopedically explained (1993, pp.230-231).

Fatigue is unveiled as the possible invitation to the coming death. Outside (or, less inside than inside?), the spotlights, the journalists, the neighbors, a representative of the church (as well as the angel figurine inside the house in the bathroom), all of them look empty and their gazes even seem to share the anguish, fears and anxieties of the self-kidnapped inside the mansion.

We can consider that the Aragonese director in *The Exterminating Angel* alludes to *The Raft of the Medusa* [Le Radeau de la Méduse] by the French Romantic painter and lithographer Théodore Géricault (1791-1824) between 1818 and 1819, where 21 characters can be counted, the same number of elements that make up the group of bourgeois trapped in the mansion on the Rue de la Providence. It becomes difficult to distinguish between inside and outside if we follow the subjectivity of the characters, and forget our role as "passive" spectators of the film. But how true is this relationship we establish with the pictorial work? Buñuel, in the series of interviews in which he participated with Tomás Pérez Turrent and José de la Colina, comments on this:

*T.P.T.*: It seems that you had been about to make a film very similar to *El ángel exterminador*, with a group locked up in a lost ship [...].

*Buñuel*: I had that plot, but it was never about to be filmed. A friend of Sadoul's, who worked in a left-wing newspaper, sent me a wonderful plot that I still have. A raft lost at sea, with 45 people. A sort of adaptation of *Le radeau de la Méduse*. Very



difficult to make, very complicated technically. Hitchcock did something similar. It's like an impossible gamble: such a small space, so many people crammed together.

*T.P.T.*: Doesn't *The Exterminating Angel* come from *Le radeau de la Méduse*?

*Buñuel*: It has nothing to do with it. There are a thousand situations similar to that one. If you want, you can make a science fiction film: fifteen astronauts in a space rocket isolated in space. The fundamental difference is that in *El ángel exterminador* there are no material circumstances that prevent the characters from leaving (1993, p.235).

The film *The Exterminating Angel*, far from being absurd as it might seem at first sight, slaps us in the face trying to awaken our senses -including the so-called "common" one-, just as it was the pretension and objective of the "theater of the absurd", alluding, on the one hand, to Brechtian "distancing effect"; and, on the other hand, to Lacan's idea of "significance". We thus have "the real and also the crudest and most naked of the real disguised as 'unreality'"; and, "the logical in what seems most wildly illogical". Having the 'table of truth' complete, what is unveiled is not only the behavior that is tautologically associated to that of the bourgeoisie, but to that of humanity as a whole under certain circumstances, of course, with nuances and differences in the repetition that transpires and we observe on the screen. Regarding the apparently oneiric and "illogical" that we have been mentioning in relation to the two Buñuel films in question, Epstein affirms that

Therefore, the procedures that the dream discourse employs and that allow it such profound sincerity, find their analogies in the cinematographic style. Such is first of all a sort of very frequent synecdoche, in which the part represents the whole and in which a detail in itself small and trivial is enlarged, repeated and becomes the center and the driving motif of a whole scene dreamed or seen on the screen. A key, a ribbon tie or a telephone, for example, will be placed by the dream and the screen in the foreground, charged with intense emotional force, with all the dramatic significance that has been attributed to this object when it was first noticed in the course of the eve or at the beginning of the film. Consequently, both in the language of the dream and in that of the cinematograph, these word-images increasingly undergo a transposition of meaning, they acquire a symbolization (1960, pp.112-113).



If *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977) shows us the decline of desire and the vital devastation suffered in terms of the meaninglessness to which it leads, the impossibility resulting from the age of an individual that we read between the unpostponable dictates of desire and the authoritarian ontology of nature that are revealed as incommunicable from beginning to end in the film, in *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972), we see a clique or elite made up of the militia, fascist aristocrats, allied with mafia capitals and imperialists in other continents; in *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972), we look at a clique or elite composed of the militia, fascist aristocrats, allied to mafia and imperialist capitals in other continents, a clergy of double standards that acts in collusion and parasitically with the ultra-right (contrary to the socialist-communist ideas that promote atheism, equity and social justice among the people), equity and social justice among their fundamental principles), all of them united with the purpose of preserving the *status quo* that will safeguard their material conditions of life, notwithstanding the social damage that this entails and takes place: Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Brazil, Paraguay, Colombia and Peru. Let us look today at the advance of the right wing in the southern cone of the continent (and the world in general).

*El ángel exterminador* (1962), puts us in scene a select redoubt of the Mexican bourgeoisie, which could well be taken and taken to any other space in Latin America. In the face of the desperation that fills the space, the wildest instincts show up among the repressed emotions that they keep with themselves and with others: anger, violence, infidelity, erotic-sexual projections, aggressive placements of one another, painful and unbidden confessions, among others. We present here another excerpt from the series of interviews in which Buñuel participated with Tomás Pérez Turrent and José de la Colina, in which the Aragonese filmmaker comments on eroticism and destruction in relation to *The Exterminating Angel*:

*J. de la C.:* This of the pleasure of destruction could be related to the notion of waste, of squandering, of which Bataille speaks. They are related to love and eroticism.<sup>14</sup>

*Buñuel:* Eroticism is a diabolical pleasure and is related to death and carrion. I have put some of that in love scenes in my films.

*J. de la C.:* One can be distressed watching *The Exterminating Angel*, but also feel at ease. To feel the pleasure of seeing how that society that has spent centuries to reach such a high point is degraded in an hour and a half of screen time, is literally destroyed at sight. *The Exterminating Angel*, if you don't mind, can be seen as a comedy.

*Buñuel:* It doesn't bother me. There is some comedy, yes. To conclude, I would say it's a failed film. It could be much better, for reasons we have already discussed (1993, p.236).

We observe in the film that as an indefinite number of days go by, food and drink become scarce, hosts and guests become exasperated, some get sick, sleep and love where they can. Etiquette, good manners and cordiality begin to fade; the human group, little by little, begins to behave rudely and selfishly. Finally, after an apparent fortuitous act that is repeated in all the attendees, they seem to locate in parallel and inexplicably an inner call that makes them feel able to go outside and leave the mansion where they were prisoners of their own personal instincts.

<sup>14</sup> See Georges Bataille, 2007. *The eroticism*. Mexico City: Tusquets.

Image 5: The Exterminating Angel (1962)



Source: [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org)

## Conclusions

The bourgeoisie, as well as desire, the individual, the world and capitalism itself are not the same as those that Buñuel knew. More than half a century has passed since the release of the two films on which we focus our attention in this work, and what he criticized with his cinematographic work continues to be the object of criticism. Creative resistance and exile as "choices" more forced than voluntary according to the circumstances that surrounded them, seem at times to have remained at that time, and at others, to have returned. Today we have forced migrations, displacements, disappeared, wars, tortured and murdered: fragments of bodies and evanescent and phantasmagoric existences. The bourgeois lifestyle - of which Buñuel was also a part since his birth - also mutated, but it did so to become much more selfish, indolent, indifferent, cynical, cruel, racist, morbid, uncritical, mediocre, conformist and vulgar. Buñuel said in images what others did and captured in books,

canvases, palimpsests, chords, sounds, metallic structures and other materials such as the body itself.

The great Aragonese filmmaker seems to have always been congruent with himself, with his way of thinking and seeing the world, of understanding, assimilating and understanding the other, of living life and dying death, however, it was perhaps in fact his contradictions and obsessions that populated his work, which is precisely where he was most congruent. Because he never ceased to be who he was, perhaps for that very reason - unlike many other greats or those considered great - he continues to be a reference for understanding the twentieth century. An example of this is the fact that Luis Buñuel's cinematography played a fundamental role in the gestation of Latin American marvelous realism, both cinematographic and literary. José Donoso, Gabriel García Márquez, Alejo Carpentier, Juan Rulfo, Carlos Fuentes, Arturo Ripstein, are just a few examples of the above.

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The eyes of Aragonese, his gaze, were those of a world that continues to look and through which we can look to understand, comprehend and comprehend ourselves: conceptual and experimental artist, risk-taker, didactic-pedagogic, critical; a master, a contemporary, an example. They say that a missing person hurts more than a dead person - and let them tell us Mexicans today- not because he is dead, but because he is dead, but because he is still alive. Buñuel will never disappear, he possesses a great "dystopian capital", rebellious, resistant and revolutionary. Wouldn't it be easier, according to the script and the arguments, to make this film today, when we transpire "the end of history"<sup>16</sup> and "post-modernly" renounce to utopia? Is this film not a genuine antecedent, a 'gesture', an allegory of a posthuman and apocalyptic vision of the global capitalopandemic times that humanity has not yet finished going through, its announcement, will there be enough time for us to

<sup>15</sup> See José María Paz Gago. "Escritores de cine. Nuevo cine y nueva narrativa latinoamericana." *Anales de Literatura Hispanoamericana*, 2000, 29, pp.43-74. See Carlos Monsiváis (2000). *Aires de familia*. Barcelona: Anagrama, pp.51 and 61. See Tomás Pérez Turrent and José de la Colina (1993). *Buñuel por Buñuel*. Madrid: Plot.

<sup>16</sup> See Esther Rubio Fedida (2007). "La posibilidad de una lectura cinematográfica de la historia". *Memoria e industria cultural*. Madrid: UNED.

pull the Benjaminian emergency brake in the face of the extermination that the angel proposes from the depths of human interiority? Questioning, all these, only to continue reflecting on our time through the filmic work of Buñuel.

Returning to the conversation/interview on *The Exterminating Angel*, the chapter dedicated to this film, number 20, is concluded by Luis Buñuel expressing the following:

*T.P.T.:* But before I finish, I would like to insist a little on the value of repetition in the film. Repetition is supposed to close the circle, instead of opening it, but in the film it is the other way around.

*Buñuel:* It's an idea of mine, something personal. I repeat myself a lot in my films, when I speak, etcetera. I don't even have to point this out to you, my patient interviewers. I am a man of obsessions. As for what you say, there is no liberation at the end of the film. It is only momentary. But the situation of confinement is going to repeat itself infinitely. They will return to the initial situation, they will make the same gestures again. They have come out of the confinement in the Nobile's house, but they remain locked in the church.

church. And now in the church it will be worse, because there are no longer twenty people, but two hundred. It is like an epidemic that spreads to infinity (1993, p.237).

And indeed, it seems to be so. Not only in *El ángel exterminador* (1962), but also in *El discreto encanto de la burguesía* (1972) and many other of his films, repetition does not function as an intratextual or intertextual *leitmotif* that insists on repeating to convince or persuade, but to confuse or make doubt, to make think, without salvation or redemption: there is no liberation, no continuous progression, but fractality and infinite fragmentariness and without definitive suture.

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