

FILM-PHILOSOPHY

Opening the Door to the Subconscious

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Gwynne Edwards (2005) *A Companion to Luis Bunuel*
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Be they horrific, disturbing or provocative, uncanny or seemingly illogical, certain moments of Luis Buñuel's films stay engraved in our memory as if they were part of our dreams or deepest nightmares. Time and space are unpredictable in Buñuel's imaginary world. Hallucinatory visions, such as Don Lope's decapitated head as a bell clapper in *Tristana* (1970), or the sensational and unforgettable fascination with Tristana's amputated leg in the same film are undoubtedly Freudian symbols. Limbs are dismantled as symbols of castration. Whether it is the eye which is sliced, the head decapitated or the leg amputated, they become synecdoches of man's sexual frustration. In Buñuel's films, enigmatic dream-like episodes that draw deep from the subconscious are used to shock or deeply disturb the audience, as well as to rebel against an older generation.

Gwynne Edwards's fascinating *A Companion to Luis Bunuel* explores the consciousness, dreams and fears of one of the most mesmerising surrealist film directors of the 20th century, trying to decipher his deeply-rooted symbolism and highlighting recurrent themes with rigour and finesse. In one of her earlier books, *The Discreet Art of Luis Bunuel: A Reading of his Films*, the Spanish theatre and film specialist had already focused on the Surrealist director, but with particular emphasis on his style, techniques and themes. This book as a continuation of her former studies gives us a real insight into

Buñuelian surrealist magic. In her introduction, Edwards's definition of Surrealism encapsulates very well the spirit of the Buñuelian film:

More than a purely artistic movement, Surrealism consisted of a revolutionary attitude to life, a philosophy which, drawing in part on the psychoanalytical experiments of Freud, emphasized the importance of the unconscious, of instinctive desire as opposed to the exercise of reason and logic. (Edwards: 2005, p.1)

As Edwards emphasizes, the world of Buñuel gives free rein to the freedom of imagination, an imagination which both religious and bourgeois characters, prisoners of the stranglehold of social codes, have been denied. It is somewhat regrettable that in this current book Edwards is barely able to focus on Buñuel's working technique, his relations with actors and his collaboration with his scriptwriters. The way he and his regular scriptwriter Jean-Claude Carrière, whose collaboration lasted 19 years, used to work is singular and casts light on the apparent dream-like nature of the films. In an interview, Jean-Claude Carrière explained:

The unconfessed intention was for both of us to concentrate on the same object, to successfully gather our ideas and something more that could be called the unconscious. Therefore, every morning, we would tell each other our dreams, sometimes our diurnal day-dreams as well, in order to tune them, as one would tune two instruments. No other occupation was conceivable. (my translation)¹

As the director also pinpoints in his autobiography, the way he and Dalí worked for the filming and editing of *Un Chien Andalou*, which only took two weeks, was extremely simple. In the same manner in which he would work with Jean-Claude Carrière, Buñuel and Dalí endeavoured "to open all doors to the irrational and keep only those images that surprised [them], without trying to explain why" (Buñuel: 1994, p.104). One may then start to wonder whether giving interpretations of Buñuel's films is not farcical, as Buñuel would generally disagree with any analysis that might be made of his films. We know for a fact that *Un Chien andalou* was born of the encounter of Buñuel's dream of a razor blade slicing an eye and of Dalí's of a hand crawling with ants (Ibid.), and it is in the psychoanalytic

¹ "L'intention, non avouée, était de nous concentrer l'un et l'autre sur le même objet, d'arriver à réunir nos idées et quelque chose en plus, qu'on pourrait appeler l'inconscient. Ainsi, chaque matin, nous nous racontions nos rêves, parfois aussi nos rêveries diurnes, pour tenter de nous accorder, comme on accorde deux instruments. Aucune autre occupation n'était concevable": <http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/actualites/celebrations2000/bunuel.htm>

interpretation of these dreams, as Edwards shows, that the cryptic meaning of each sequence can be untangled.

The style of the book is not overtly academic and makes the subject accessible to a wider audience. *A Companion to Luis Buñuel* follows a chronological order and falls into four major parts: the first deals with the Surrealists and explains the foundations of their beliefs and thinking. It then analyses the symbolic imagery of *Un Chien andalou*, *l'Age d'or* (1930), produced in association with Salvador Dali, and Buñuel's third film, *Las Hurdes* (1932), a bewildering piece of visual anthropology. The following section, "the Surrealists in Chains", particularly focuses on *He* (1952), *Tristana*, and lastly, *Viridiana* (1961), which is often considered one of Buñuel's most accomplished works. Buñuel's treatment of the bourgeoisie and religion is the centrepiece of the two preceding sections. The last section, "thank God I am still an atheist", is in fact a nod to a chapter of his autobiography. The book is well supplemented, with a very useful guide to secondary sources on Buñuel, as well as a detailed filmography which makes it particularly user-friendly.

Edwards shows how regular patterns in the scenes hold Buñuel's films together. Whether they deal with political or religious issues, or belong to the Spanish, French or Mexican period, their depiction of the world is almost identical. Anti-bourgeois sentiments and the rejection of conventional moral and social values are always under the scrutiny of Buñuel's camera. In some respects, one could see a parallel with Renoir's caricatural depiction of the bourgeoisie. *La Règle du jeu* (1939), with its codes, materialism and indifference of the *petites gens*, conveys in essence the same message as Buñuel's films, whereby, according to Voltaire's satirical view of human nature, "we do not live in the best of all possible worlds" (Edwards: 2005, p.90). As in Renoir's films, servants are no better than their masters in a world animated by greed, lust and bitterness. Disappointments in love nurture not only frustrations but also a desire for revenge.

There is, as it were, a certain degree of unity in Buñuel's films with recurrent themes such as the bourgeois figure, the blind man, the frightened virgin and the priest. All are part of the Buñuelian universe, as shown through Edwards's meticulous decoding, which finds its sources in Buñuel's personal obsessions and values. Drawing from Buñuel's autobiography, *My Last Breath*, as well as his wife's autobiography and the influential circle of Buñuel's close friends (Lorca, Dali etc.), Edwards traces the roots of the film-maker's creativity and inspiration, as well as his sexual frustrations, phobias, anti-clerical beliefs and ferocious depictions of the complacent bourgeoisie in his Spanish background, strict

education and bourgeois milieu. Through his Jesuit schooling, Buñuel was instilled with the belief that sex “was sinful and deserved punishment” (Edwards: 2005, p.49). Dreams for Buñuel would become a way of overcoming this sexual dissatisfaction, which originated from his upbringing and Catholic background. Edwards’s approach is both philosophical and psychoanalytic and often illuminating, as she manages to successfully capture the surreal and bizarre atmosphere of each film, showing a particular sensitivity in her analysis of their imagery.

One is forced to acknowledge that there is a consistency, not only in the themes of the films, but also in the actors Buñuel used. He often employs the same cast from Fernando Rey, to Catherine Deneuve or Delphine Seyrig, among others. It seems to me that Buñuel’s adoptive acting family of familiar characters, like Zola’s genealogy of the Rougon-Macquart or Balzac’s *Comedie humaine*, creates a caricature of human society in miniature and, just as in dreams, these popular figures of Spanish and French cinema come to haunt us from film to film. I would go as far as to argue that they become reminiscences of our collective imagination. Both fresh-faced and ingénue, Catherine Deneuve and Carole Bouquet as lead characters are also, it seems, the epitome of the praying mantis; to the beauty and charms of which, tinged with a certain degree of innocence, the man succumbs. Buñuel’s films bear with them the taste of original sin. *La vida es un sueño* (*Life is a Dream*, 1655), as Calderon de la Barca would say.

Are we daydreaming or are we wide-awake? It is hard to say as dreams or nightmares can erupt at any time in Buñuel’s phantasmagoria, startling us out of our comforting reality to face and purge our fears and taboos. Whether dream sequences act as a catharsis or, through offering escapism, just aim to entertain, one is never indifferent, as they shed light on inhibitions and unspeakable fantasies. Both iconoclastic and riveting, images break the norm and disrupt conventions to the point where our vision becomes internalized. The fictitious and deceptive surface of reality is peeled off to disclose the interior life of things.

Literature is full of blind figures, and so are Buñuel’s films, and perhaps Edwards could have analyzed these figures in more detail. From Tiresias, Samson and Oedipus, to King Lear, the ability to see is symbolically equated with lack of insight, understanding, and direction, while blindness is seen as an interior light. In all cases, the infirmity of the blind is compensated by a hyper-acuity of senses and the visual is turned into a spiritual experience. In Derrida’s analysis of portraits of the blind, blindness has changed focus from failing eyes to hand:

The theme of drawings about the Blind is first and foremost the hand... that which one draws thanks to that with which one draws it, the very body as instrument, the drawing of the drawn, the hand of the manipulations, the maneuvers, the manners, hand games or hand work, drawing as surgery. (1990)

The hand motif has replaced sight and, as was clear in Dali's paintings, it becomes a Buñuelian fetish symbol of the sinful act of masturbation. As clearly highlighted by Edwards, the emphasis on tormented relationships, sexual libertinage and on the tactile, which regulates the unconscious desire as a substitute for sexual frustration, is an emblem of sexuality which can be analyzed in the light of Freudian psychoanalysis. Images of male characters groping bare female breasts is an obsessional image in Buñuel's films, which reinforces the phallic elements that are omnipresent in the films. The hand stretched forward is the promise to seize a sensual and emotional reality. If characters are blind, we the spectators see and become voyeurs, but we are also like Orpheus trying to seize a reality which immediately vanishes into thin air at the very moment we thought it within our reach.

I would argue that religious symbolism represents the emotional dimension, omnipresent in the films, even in the symbolic meaning of names. Does not the name Tristana seem to echo Viridiana as if the two names were linked, not only by assonances but also by a kind of relationship? If the former is for us reminiscent of Tristan in Beroul's 12th century *Tristan Iseult*, the two female characters are Christ-like figures. Besides, there is almost a prophetic message inherent in Buñuel's films, such as in Don Lope's quip about Tristana - a girl only remains honest when she has a broken leg and stays at home. Don Lope's wish for a wife sheltered from the hands of men is fulfilled at the end. Handicapped by a mutilated leg and confined to a wheelchair or compelled to use crutches, she is completely under Don Lope's control. More than symbolic, this scene, as are many others as Edwards suggests, is characteristically autobiographical. As Rucar des Buñuel's memoirs testify, the jealous and possessive husband subject to many sexual inhibitions whose wife was often urged to stay at home was none other than Buñuel himself. Buñuel's films are meditations on freedom, control and power in a male-dominated society. It becomes obvious through the reading of *A Companion to Luis Bunuel* that some characters are no more than Buñuel's projections of himself.

This book is highly recommended, not only for Buñuel enthusiasts, but also for film scholars, students and neophytes in search of a better understanding of Buñuel's obscure symbolism, his motivations and inhibitions. Each film sequence is always to be

rediscovered. It is a riddle open to multiple readings and Edwards gives us keys to decipher the powerful imagery of surrealism. Perhaps the last line of Buñuel's autobiography is also prophetic: "Ghostly pale, sliding silently along the walls, my papers under my arm, I'd return to the cemetery and read about all the disasters in the world before falling back to sleep, safe and secure in my tomb" (Buñuel: 1994, p.256). Buñuel's ghost has not finished haunting us.

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Selected Filmography

Un Chien andalou (1929)

L'Age d'or (1930)

Las Hurdes (1932)

Los Olvidados (1950)

He (1952)

Nazarin (1958)

Viridiana (1961)

Journal d'une femme de chambre (1964)

Belle de jour (1966)

La Voie lactee (1969)

Tristana (1970)

Le Charme discret de la bourgeoisie (1972)

Le Fantome de la liberte (1974)

Cet obscur objet du desir (1977)

