

# Women Through the Lens of Luis Buñuel: A Critical Analysis of Gender and Film

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## Abstract

Luis Buñuel, the renowned filmmaker of the 1900s, is known primarily for the Surrealism that permeates much of his filmography. His films often make a commentary on politics, Catholicism, and/or the bourgeoisie, all topics that are important to Buñuel as a person and as a Surrealist. It can also be argued that Buñuel may be criticizing the patriarchy with his somewhat outlandish and potentially parodying portrayal of women. However, upon further consideration of Buñuel's work, which contains recurrent and damaging representations of women, this assessment seems simplistic, or at least incomplete. Analysis of Buñuel's films leaves one wondering whether he is truly criticizing the patriarchy or rather contributing to the patriarchy, albeit possibly with good intentions. In this paper, Buñuel's films *Un chien andalou*, *El ángel exterminador*, *Susana*, *Viridiana*, *Belle de jour*, and *Cet obscur objet du désir* are analyzed and presented as examples of his depiction of women and sexual desire. Quotes from Buñuel himself, testimonies from his acquaintances, and further explorations of the time period, however, seek to show the ambiguity presented in those films: are they a criticism of the times, or are they proof of Buñuel's misogynistic views?

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Society and Art

While society often informs art, the inverse is also true. Throughout time art has been known to influence the society of any given time period. An example of this influence is that of film on culture. Notable as evidence of this cycle of society and art is Spanish filmmaker, Luis Buñuel. Luis Buñuel's films were popular in their time, both as pieces of entertainment or art and as scandals of censorship. The popularity of Buñuel's films was so wide as to exert a profound influence on contemporary beliefs and values. Buñuel's films often depicted women in a certain light - usually as powerful, rebellious, and sexual. However, Buñuel seems to suggest with the nature of his content that independent, powerful women are bad eggs - they disobey the male protagonists and wreak havoc on the world around them. Such depictions of women were bound to influence the audiences who watched Buñuel's films, but it is also likely that Buñuel's depictions of women were based on what he knew about them from his own society.

In his book *Seeing Films Politically*, Mas'ud Zavarzadeh says "films, then, do not so much 'report', 'reflect', or even 'interpret' (in the conventional sense of the word) the world 'out there' or 'in here' as they do in fact produce it and produce it historically; that is to say within the frames or intelligibility available to a culture at a particular moment"<sup>17</sup>. Reality, then, has been constructed by society and by the art (such as films) that a society produces. Buñuel's society, as evidenced by his art, attributed certain qualities to femininity and womanhood that were not necessarily innately "female". Zavarzadeh explains this phenomenon as it relates to contemporary filmmaking.

The normal woman (as feminine) is articulated in contemporary films (one of the many discourses of ideology), for example, as emotionally warm, as physically slim, as intellectually accommodating, as morally sensitive and caring. None of these traits are in themselves and “by nature” definitive of femininity and are all in fact political attributes required for maintaining asymmetrical power relations and thus the exploitative gender relations between men and women in patriarchal capitalism<sup>17</sup>.

In other words, many of the traits a society deems “feminine” are rather assigned to the female sex in order to oppress women. Films help to spread and reinforce sexist thinking that these traits must always appear in women.

## 1.2. Gender and Fetish

Gender is typically still considered to be synonymous with one’s biological sex, but that definition is outdated and incorrect. Rather, gender is the social and psychological concept that one uses as a self-concept. As Teresa de Lauretis states in her book *Technologies of Gender*, “the representation of gender is its construction - and in the simplest sense it can be said that all of Western Art and high culture is the engraving of the history of that construction”<sup>7</sup>. With that in mind, it can be inferred that Buñuel’s films have a great effect on how gender is viewed by society in his time.

The cinematographic techniques and themes throughout Buñuel’s films help to emphasize this view on gender. For instance, Buñuel has been known throughout time for his tendency to fetishize legs and feet. In Christian Metz’s book “The Imaginary Signifier,” it is said that such a fetish comes from the idea of female castration. As Metz states, “It [the child] believes that all human beings originally have a penis and it therefore understands what it has seen as the effect of a mutilation which redoubles its fear that it will be subjected to a similar fate (or else, in the case of the little girl after a certain age, the fear that she has already been subjected to it)”<sup>8</sup>. This figurative idea of female castration was endorsed by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, both famous psychoanalysts. It makes the claim that because of this fear of castration, people naturally have a fetish. They will want to stare at the clothing that masks the horrifying discovery of the lack of a penis. Such fetish eventually becomes necessary in order to access pleasure such as orgasm<sup>8</sup>. Metz goes on to speak of how fetishism becomes an innate part of cinema by stating “It is no accident that in the cinema some cameramen, some directors, some critics, some spectators demonstrate a real ‘fetishism of technique’...”<sup>8</sup>. This very Freudian concept is perhaps outdated and inaccurate, but it is important to the subject of cinema and also to Buñuel and his views on sexuality. As Laura Mulvey claims, scopophilia is, in this case, the pleasure derived from looking at an erotic object<sup>10</sup>. Buñuel uses fetishism to add a scopophilic aspect to his works, making women objects of desire from which the viewer can gain pleasure.

## 2. Buñuel and Surrealism

Luis Buñuel is known as an affluent member of the Surrealist movement and much of his work is based on the ideas of Surrealism. Surrealism and gender may not be obviously connected topics but the two are intertwined in many ways. Surrealism was one of the most important artistic movements of all time. The Surrealist movement brought out many great artists and intellectuals in both its founding country and in other areas of the world. The movement of Surrealism, though intended to challenge the establishment (and thus the patriarchy), manages to be innately misogynistic. Rudolf E. Kuenzli comments on this idea in an essay titled “Surrealism and Misogyny”.

The Surrealists lived in their own masculine world, with their eyes closed, the better to construct their male phantasms of the feminine. They did not see woman as a subject, but as a projection, an object of their own dreams of femininity. These masculine dreams play an active part in patriarchy’s misogynistic positioning of women. It is precisely in Surrealism, with its emphasis on dreams, automatic writing, the unconscious, that we can expect to find some of the least inhibited renditions of male fantasies, and thus gain a good understanding of male desires and interests.<sup>6</sup>

This occurrence of misogyny in Surrealism can be seen in the films of Luis Buñuel, the renowned filmmaker of the 1900s, who did the majority of his work in either Spain, France, or Mexico. His films, with their shocking Surrealism and stark social commentary, helped to incite change in their respective countries. However, among those changes was the normalization of misogyny. Buñuel’s films contain, amongst their Surrealist themes, some shocking commentary on gender and women.

To understand Surrealism, one must first understand Dadaism, the Swiss literary and artistic movement that attempted to oppose the bourgeoisie and the war. Dadaism arose as a reaction to World War I, mocking the materialism and nationalism that was thought to cause the war. Dadaism used an automatic approach to art and literature (called “automatism”) that allowed the creator to use whatever automatically comes to mind<sup>16</sup>. The use of this method allows the uninhibited depths of the subconscious mind to emerge as art. In particular, Dadaists found film to be an ideal vessel for their artistic messages. Man Ray, a highly influential and successful photographer, created the first Dada film titled *The Return to Reason*<sup>11</sup> (1923). In the film, a dream-like experience is depicted and the traditional narrative of film is abandoned and replaced with unrelated imagery. Artists like Man Ray in the Dada movement found that the medium of film allowed the creator to easily distort reality with a trick of lighting or with physical alterations to the film strips.

Dadaism died out with the birth of Surrealism, but Dadaist ideas heavily influenced the new movement. Surrealism, a literary and artistic movement which originated in France in the 1910s, intended to challenge the establishment with art and ideas that shock and produce strong reactions from the viewer<sup>16</sup>. Many avant-garde directors came to the Surrealist movement from a background of painting after discovering how the medium could effectively portray their thoughts on society and the establishment<sup>16</sup>. Man Ray created more films in the realm of Surrealism, working with many other Surrealist artists to produce works that became influential in the areas of film and Surrealism.

Surrealism became an official movement in 1924 when poet André Breton published his *Manifesto of Surrealism*. This manifesto allowed Surrealism to flourish as a political movement that intellectuals could stand behind<sup>16</sup>. Breton and his colleagues were influenced by Sigmund Freud, the renowned psychologist whose theory of psychoanalysis became integral to Surrealism. Additionally, the Surrealist movement was extensively inspired by the political work and ideas of Karl Marx.

Freud’s theory of human behavior based on sex drive and aggression raised some important questions about sexuality, religion, and mental illness, all of which are themes commonly seen in Surrealist works. Freud’s psychoanalysis of dreams led to Surrealism being heavily inspired by dreams, as dreams are often seen as a window to how the unconscious mind works. One main goal of Surrealism is to depict the unreal and the strange, otherwise known as the Freudian concept of ‘the uncanny’<sup>9</sup>.

The idea that art could be more than just aesthetically pleasing arose from Karl Marx. People working in the Surrealist movement strove to use their art to make a social commentary and effectively change society for the better. Furthermore, many Surrealist artists keep to the idea that if one is able to break away from a narrative, one is able to break away from censorship. This belief is why so many Surrealists stray away from creating narrative works.

Although Surrealism is generally thought of as a primarily European movement, it was also very influential to Latin American art and literature. Artists such as Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo collaborated with André Breton and other leaders of the Surrealist movement, the three of whom eventually becoming some of the most influential artists of all time. Surrealism became essential to Latin American culture because of how effective it was at making social commentary and allowing its creators to incite societal change.

Perhaps one of the more intriguing Latin American/Spanish artists is Luis Buñuel, who became one of the most pronounced Surrealist filmmakers of his time. Buñuel was born in 1900 in Calanda, Spain, where he lived with his bourgeois family in a small agricultural town. He had a religious upbringing, going to church regularly and attending Jesuit schools. His religious and bourgeois family influenced his art, and Buñuel became known for the social commentary that much of his art makes. In college, Buñuel befriended Salvador Dalí and other affluent members of the Surrealist movement, creating much art along the way. After creating several films, Buñuel left Spain for New York to work at the Museum of Modern Art, but was exiled because of his suspected relations with anti-Americanism and Communism. From there, he went to Mexico, where his film career continued and he paired up with the cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa for many films.

### 3. *Un chien andalou*<sup>14</sup>

It was with Salvador Dalí that Buñuel created *Un chien andalou*, a short, surreal film whose purpose was to have no purpose. The unrelated images were constructed entirely of scenes from their dreams, and included things such as ants coming out of hands and a razor slicing through an eye. *Un chien andalou* is one example of many Surrealist films that defy reality through dream-like (and dream-inspired) imagery.

*Un chien andalou*, one of the first examples of truly Surrealist film, also managed to involve the topic of sexual assault. Throughout the film there appears imagery of the protagonist grabbing the breasts of the lead woman without

her consent. She attempts to run away and fight back against him, but she runs into many surreal scenarios, such as the man pulling a piano and two dead cows on his back.

*Un chien andalou* is an important film to keep in mind throughout the duration of this paper, as its significance as Buñuel's first film is important. However, knowing that *Un chien andalou* was made to make no sense, it is difficult to analyze or criticize.

#### 4. *El ángel exterminador*<sup>5</sup>

A pinnacle of Buñuel's career was his film entitled *El ángel exterminador*, which was a commentary on the bourgeoisie. It was released in 1962 and filmed during his time in Mexico with Gabriel Figueroa as the cinematographer. In it, the influences of Freud and Marx can clearly be seen. In an article by Robert J. Miles, the Freudian concept of "the uncanny" is used to describe Surrealism. According to Freud, there are subtle differences between "homelike" or "comfortable" and "uncanny" or "uncomfortable," the idea of which is the foundation of Surrealism<sup>9</sup>. It is argued that the uncanny is the main source of inspiration for Luis Buñuel's *El ángel exterminador*, which contains imagery that evokes a strong Freudian message<sup>9</sup>. There are comparisons made between Freud's ideas of severed body parts (or fetishism) and the imagery in *El ángel exterminador* and in other films by Buñuel<sup>9</sup>. In addition to the Freudian themes, *El ángel exterminador* makes a commentary on the bourgeoisie, something that Marx's socialism would surely stand behind.

*El ángel exterminador* takes place at a dinner party held by the upper class, but things are not as simple as they seem once it appears no one is able to leave the room. The entire film satirically mocks the bourgeoisie and the separation of the wealthy and the poor. The film uses the bear and the sheep (whom we would normally think of as savage) to show the savagery of the humans - the contrast between the animals mulling about pointlessly and ultimately being killed for food and the humans attempting to sacrifice their host is quite stark. Additionally, the bourgeoisie are radically separated from their servants by the narrative - while the wealthy are stuck in a room, the servants disappear before anything bad can happen to them. The bourgeoisie and the servants become ultimately incapable of identifying with each other.

*El ángel exterminador* has a narrative which places the viewer in the same position as the characters, causing the audience to constantly wonder what is happening and why. Both the cinematography and the story add to this narrative. *El ángel exterminador* evokes themes such as the feeling of being an outsider vs. the feeling of being an insider and yearning for freedom, both of which are themes of Buñuel's life. Buñuel's exile from the United States led to his feeling of being an outsider. He was, at one point, making films under someone else's jurisdiction, and yearned for the freedom of expression. Once in Mexico, Buñuel took up Mexican citizenship and found freedom in the creation of a number of films, including *El ángel exterminador*.

The cinematography of Gabriel Figueroa excellently portrays the themes of *El ángel exterminador*. Considering the theme of outsider vs. insider, there is a consistent message about border crossing seen throughout the entire film. There is no way into the house and there is no way out of the room, thus there is the need to cross an imaginary border. The cinematography of *El ángel exterminador* represents this distinction of borders quite well - the black curtain separating the dining room and the living room works as a visual barrier between the two rooms, allowing the viewer to better understand the situation. The curtain, with its arch-like shape, draws the viewer's eye into the room. The camera, like the characters, seems to be stuck in the room for the majority of the film.

It is established early on in the film that one main character, Leticia, is a virgin. The reason for her virginity being mentioned is not apparent until the end of the film, when Leticia sleeps with (or is possibly raped by - the distinction is unclear) another of the guests. Once she is no longer a 'virgin', she notices that everyone is in the exact same spot as they were when the night started. By directing everyone to do as they had done and said that night, Leticia frees them all from their confinement. In the end, it is only etiquette and a loss of innocence that frees them. It is an interesting commentary on the loss of innocence to show that only virginity could save the characters. However, there is also a parallel to Leticia in the image of a lamb who wanders into the room only to be killed for food. Just as Leticia was their only hope for survival, so, too, was the lamb. Without the lamb, they would not have lived long at all.

After the characters have broken out of their living room prison, they head to church and pray that they never find themselves in a similar situation. Unfortunately, they all end up being trapped in the church. Knowing that Buñuel came from a religious background, this could be a commentary on structural religious institutions being limiting in terms of spirituality. The church itself could be a physical manifestation of the bourgeoisie and of "the institution." Throughout the film, religion seems to provide a justification for the various injustices performed. Everyone agrees to sacrifice the host in the name of religion, and many of the characters use religion as an excuse for their actions.

Buñuel has claimed that there is no meaning or symbolism in *El ángel exterminador*, despite the obvious jab at the bourgeoisie. Regardless of his claim, many critics and viewers have applied meaning to the film. Taking Buñuel's proposed lack of meaning into mind, the surreal nature of the film becomes apparent. If this film had no meaning, then it would be nearly impossible to understand the film's storyline. The constant repetition in the film becomes quite surreal for both the viewers and the characters. Buñuel has said that there are around 20 repetitions in the film, all of which contribute to the feeling of surrealism<sup>9</sup>. The symbolism (or lack thereof) and the repetitions seen in *El ángel exterminador* are just some examples of what makes it an excellent example of Surrealism.

And with the Surrealism comes misogyny. The use of Leticia's sexuality to save the day makes an extreme statement about Buñuel's views on women. It would seem from watching *El ángel exterminador* that Buñuel believes women should not be overtly sexual. If a woman has had sex, she will not be able to save the general population. A woman who has had sex is seen as unholy and good-for-nothing, and it is only in the instance of the sacrifice of one's virginity for the betterment of the population that having sex is seen as a positive. Such a viewpoint on virginity is simultaneously repeated and refuted in other Buñuel films, as will be discussed in the pages to come.

## 5. *Susana*<sup>13</sup>

Buñuel's Mexican film *Susana* (1951) was the first he made after the commercial success of *Los olvidados*. As a result of Buñuel's increase in popularity, *Susana* and the next several films he made were productions for the Mexican film industry rather than Buñuel's own independent films<sup>1</sup>. In attempt to stray away from the standard Mexican films of the time, Buñuel set out to create a parody of a melodrama in the form of *Susana*. The ever-so-popular Mexican melodramas typically represent the values of God, nation, and home, all of which are signs of a good Mexican citizen<sup>1</sup>. Thus, the genre of melodrama produces films that are not just entertainment but that are representative of Mexican culture and history as well as the standards for Mexican society at the time. However, those three themes eventually evolve into something more along the lines of "love, sexuality, and parenting," particularly in the family-oriented melodramas<sup>1</sup>. The addition of these three elements results in a distinct shift in how gender is viewed in Mexico.

It has been claimed that Buñuel always attempts to dismantle Catholicism, the bourgeois, and the patriarchy through his filmmaking<sup>1</sup>. However, it could be said that Buñuel is instead contributing to these ideas through his films. Buñuel has expressed concern that *Susana* may have failed as a parody, which makes it just another standard melodrama with perhaps some Buñuelian flair. Seeing *Susana* as a standard melodrama means that the film also adheres to the tropes seen in the *cabareteras* and *comedias rancheras* which were so popular in Mexico at the time. Such genres of film often display sexual tension and machismo - tropes that strongly encourage a patriarchal society and the objectification of women.

*Susana* centers around its titular character, a temptress and seductress who escaped from a women's reformatory facility and is temporarily adopted by a family, most of whom she tries to seduce. The women of the family dislike Susana for her behavior, but the men adore her. Throughout *Susana* Buñuel compares the character of Susana to the devil, effectively saying that openly sexual women are terrible people. This same comparison is also made in Buñuel's film *Simón del desierto*<sup>12</sup> (1965), this time with the character of the devil in the form of a sexual woman who acts as a temptress. In one scene of *Susana* which takes place in the jail cell of the reformatory, Susana is depicted next to the shadow of a cross coming from the bars of the window. In the moments after, Susana takes the bars down, steps on them, and escapes through the window, effectively destroying the image of the cross.

Buñuel uses the ever-so-common male gaze to document the objectification of women. In one scene, Jesus, a helper of the family, follows Susana into the hen-house where she is collecting eggs. Despite Susana's obvious lack of interest in Jesus, he continues to harass her and eventually pulls her close for an embrace, effectively breaking the eggs that Susana has collected in her skirt. There is then a shot of the broken eggs running down Susana's legs. The scene is interesting because in Spanish, the word for "eggs" is also the word for "testicles," so Susana is essentially being called a 'ball-breaker'. This is metaphorically saying that women are not allowed to reject men - especially not when they are openly sexual with other men. Buñuel is quoted as saying "It's very attractive to me to see thighs with something viscous running down them because the skin is brought closer; it's as if we were not only seeing them but touching them"<sup>3</sup>. His words reveal that he blatantly objectifies his female characters and uses the male gaze to do so. He speaks of the thighs without recognizing that they belong to a human - he treats them as nothing more than objects that are completely at his disposal and that exist purely for the pleasure of men.

This theme of objectification is one that resurfaces regularly in Buñuel's films and will be discussed more thoroughly later on.

## 6. *Viridiana*<sup>15</sup>

*Viridiana* (1961) is one of Buñuel's best-known films due to the controversy caused by its suggestiveness. Filmed in Spain, *Viridiana* is a wonderful and horrifying story of a nun-to-be who leaves the convent to visit her uncle Don Jaime. Don Jaime quickly realizes that his niece bears a striking resemblance to his late wife, and immediately begins to court Viridiana. His obsession with her grows until he hatches a plan to drug her tea and rape her. Having "consummated their love," Viridiana would no longer be able to go to the convent to become a nun. At the last minute, as he has Viridiana unconscious on the bed, Don Jaime's "cowardice" (or morality, depending on how you view it) kicks in and he backs out of his plan. Later, Don Jaime tells Viridiana that he went through with the plan so that she would stay with him.

Eventually Don Jaime kills himself because Viridiana refuses to love him. After his death, Viridiana's cousin Jorge comes to take over the house. Viridiana decides not to go back to the convent but instead gathers a group of beggars and puts them to work with a payment of housing and food. Viridiana puts all of her efforts into caring for these beggars, becoming a mother-like figure for them.

*Viridiana* is well known for the controversy surrounding its ending. The original ending, which featured the suggestion that Viridiana has sex with her cousin, Jorge, was rejected by the Spanish Board of Censors for its promiscuity. Buñuel then wrote a second ending which is perhaps more suggestive than the first. While playing cards with the servant Ramona, Jorge announces to Viridiana "you know, the first time I saw you, I thought 'my cousin and I will end up shuffling the deck together'", implying that the three are about to have a ménage à trois.

In a conversation with film critics José de la Colina and Tomás Pérez Turrent, Buñuel speaks of his sexual fantasy as an adolescent. With detail Buñuel describes his imaginary scenario in which he drugs and rapes the Queen of Spain, who is similar in appearance to Viridiana. In Buñuel's own words, "I find the idea of having a sleeping woman at my disposal very stimulating. I can do it in my imagination, but in practice it would scare me"<sup>3</sup>. The parallel here between Buñuel and Don Jaime is stark - in fact, Buñuel has admitted that he identifies with the character of Don Jaime<sup>3</sup>. Buñuel consistently manages to speak kindly of Don Jaime despite the negative traits the character displays (such as attempting to rape his niece).

The content of *Viridiana* and Buñuel's commentary on the film culminate in a strong instance of misogyny. The portrayal of rape as an everyday act of love and lust is an abhorrent one that normalizes rape, and Buñuel's eagerness to compare himself to a rapist (and particularly to said rapist's sexually malicious tendencies) is equally as horrifying. Portraying such views in a film as popular as *Viridiana* (even if it was known for its controversy) leads to the audiences absorbing and believing such a fallacy. This can result in rape and misogynistic views being further carried out by the audiences, though perhaps only subconsciously.

## 7. *Belle de jour*<sup>2</sup>

Buñuel is perhaps known best for his 1967 film entitled *Belle de jour*, for which he won several awards. The French film surrounds the life of Séverine, a housewife who loves her husband, Pierre, but finds him sexually unappealing. Séverine often fantasizes about having sexual encounters involving domination, bondage, and masochism, but feels she will never get these things in her relationship with Pierre. After discovering the existence of a high-class 'house of pleasure', Séverine begins to work a 2pm-5pm shift as a prostitute. Her sexual desires are satisfied here and her relationship with Pierre is made better for it. In the end, one of Séverine's clients becomes obsessed with her and shoots her husband. Pierre is put into a coma by the accident and Séverine's occupation is revealed to him by a friend.

*Belle de jour*'s depiction of Séverine implies that women are neither allowed to be prudes nor whores. Pierre is dissatisfied with Séverine at the beginning of the film because she will not sleep with him in either sense of the phrase. Pierre remains patient with her, but the film manages to depict Séverine's virginity as a negative aspect of her character. The first client Séverine has makes fun of her virginity and throughout the film Séverine's shyness about sex is mocked. Eventually, Séverine becomes comfortable with her sexuality and her relationship with Pierre is improved but her newfound sexuality ultimately leads to the destruction of their relationship and to Pierre being shot. There is an overall morality to the film in making a statement about women's sexuality. Women have to behave a certain way when it comes to their bodies and desires but men are allowed to be openly sexual and to cheat because they are men and because the drive for sex is innately masculine.

Although *Belle de jour* is not overtly surreal, it does contain certain aspects of the Surrealist movement. For instance, the film was very explicit for its time, containing a lot of sexual content that would have been frowned upon by most

people. Such out-of-the-ordinary content would seem surreal to a viewer of the time. Additionally, Séverine's fantasies and flashbacks both add a surreal element to the film.

It is notable that *Belle de jour* had extreme success among female audiences in Mexico, Italy, and Spain, all of which were countries where female sexuality was typically repressed at the time. Interviewers Colina and Turrent explain this phenomenon by saying that the thought of a sexually liberal woman excited the repressed women of such countries<sup>3</sup>. In response to this explanation, Bunuel claims that the psychoanalyst Fernando Cesarman has accused him of being a misogynist and remarks "I don't think I am a misogynist. Perhaps I don't understand women very much. It is also true that I find myself more comfortable in the company of men than women"<sup>3</sup>. It is important that Bunuel does not consider himself a misogynist, as that must mean he is not intentionally inserting misogyny into his films. However, Bunuel still says that he does not understand women, and if that is the case, why does he focus his work so heavily on women and sexuality? It would seem, then, that Bunuel's films represent women as he dreams of them, and that fantasy may just happen to be inaccurate.

## 8. *Cet obscur objet du désir*<sup>4</sup>

The final film directed by Luis Buñuel, *Cet obscur objet du désir* (1977), tells a surreal tale full of lust and sexual frustration. To begin, the title itself begs to be analyzed. The English translation is *That Obscure Object of Desire*, "that object" referring to Conchita. Thus, Bunuel manages to objectify his lead female with merely the title of the film.

*Cet obscur objet du désir* can easily be seen as either an example of a strong female character or as an example of how terrible and frustrating women are. The film portrays the love interest, Conchita, as a tease who constantly allures the lead, Matieu, but never gives him what he wants. Conchita consistently rejects Matieu's offers of sex and instead becomes a nude dancer and tricks Matieu into watching her have sex with another man. These outright rejections and acts of rebellion on Conchita's part could be seen as a display of a strong female, but the character and actions of Matieu must also be considered. Matieu is an astutely and frankly horrible person. He persistently pressures Conchita into having sex with him despite her having said that she does not want to. After becoming immensely frustrated by her, he beats her and later dumps a bucket of water on her head. This entire story is being told by Matieu to a group of strangers on a train, which leads to the viewer seeing the plot from Matieu's point of view. Because Matieu sees Conchita's sexuality as a negative characteristic, the viewer, too, must see this as negative.

However, there is much surrealism that permeates this film, such as intermittent bomb explosions and the unexpected death of both Conchita and Matieu at the end of the film. The addition of these startling elements interrupts the narrative Matieu is creating for the audience and thus his opinions on Conchita's sexuality are interrupted. This surrealism, then, allows the viewer to gather their thoughts and create their own opinion on Conchita and Matieu's situation.

Such an atypical narrative leads one to think that perhaps Buñuel is critiquing characters like Matieu and their representation of the patriarchy. Buñuel does manage to portray an independent and powerful woman in the character of Conchita, and may be doing so intentionally.

## 9. Conclusion

It is interesting how most of Buñuel's films have titles which directly refer to the lead female. His preferred subject is undoubtedly women and sex, but most people know him for his Surrealist comments on the bourgeoisie and Catholicism. Why is it that many tend to ignore such a large facet of Buñuel's work? It is possible that at the time the Surrealism was more novel and important to audiences than the subject matter of his films. This is strange, though, as the extreme situations women are put through in Buñuel's films should seem shocking to such audiences. Perhaps audiences of the time were nervous to voice their opinions on the subject, as feminism had only just become established and did not become commonplace until the mid- to late- 1900s. Still, it does seem odd that such a large aspect of Buñuel's work was almost entirely ignored.

Taking the censorship and controversy of Buñuel's films into mind, it can be argued and assumed that Buñuel is attempting to critique the patriarchy in his films. His depiction of women as bold, independent, and openly sexual initially seems like a step in the direction of empowering women. However, upon further investigation of Buñuel himself, things get a bit murky. It would seem that Buñuel is trying to insert his misogynistic and objectifying personal views into his films. There is no clear evidence that he is pointedly trying to criticize the patriarchy, but it is also difficult to certainly state that he is being misogynistic with intent.

Considering Buñuel's tendency for fetishism and objectification, combined with the quotes from Buñuel and the overall content of his oeuvre, it seems as if he may be contributing to the patriarchy with his work. However, it must also be considered that he was a Surrealist, and the ultimate goal of Surrealism was to challenge the establishment. It is also important to note that many of Buñuel's films caused controversy at their release and are only now being accepted by critics as masterful works of art. It is generally known that audiences have liked his work throughout time. Buñuel also has said about several of his films that he thinks they were failures as they did not convey what he wanted or they were under-exaggerated so that he could get by the censors.

Some themes that occur regularly in Buñuel's films are those of objectification, censorship and controversy, and the entwined nature of Surrealism and the patriarchy. Buñuel persistently objectifies his own characters, and tends to do so using fetish and rape. Because he was so bold when it came to including sexual content, Buñuel often received much criticism from the censors and often caused some controversy among audiences. His steps towards clashing with the standards of cinema at the time are notable, as he intended to challenge the in-place notions of sexuality. However, in doing so he also inserted his own ingrained views on women and sex, causing the films to be perhaps more misogynistic than intended. This misogyny seems to come with the realm of Surrealism, though, as the entire goal of Surrealism is to challenge the establishment through uncommon artistic methods using the ideas of Freud, Marx, and other prominent figures. Basing one's entire life philosophy off of the likes of Freud and Marx, though, can result in the creation of fairly prejudiced and biased art. And when said art becomes popular, whether for the controversy it causes or for the entertainment aspect, the audience can absorb the morals. Society, then, is influenced by art just as art is influenced by society. Considering all of this, it seems as if the question of Buñuel's moral stance is ultimately unanswerable - or rather, it depends on the time period from which one views his work and on who is viewing his work.

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