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#### SURREALISM AND VIOLENCE, LUIS BUÑUEL'S THE *LOS OLVIDADOS* (*THE FORGOTTEN ONES*)

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##### *Buñuel, surrealist director*

In January of 1950 Luis Buñuel writes to his friend José Rubia Barcia about his latest film project. It is a project which he considers to be fundamental for the future of his film career (and his personal destiny) in Mexico, where he arrived in 1947 from Hollywood. The new film will be a "mixture of *Tierra sin pan* (*Land Without Bread*) and *L'âge d'or* (*The Golden Age*), with the addition of elements from the last fifteen years"<sup>1</sup>. A few months earlier he had divulged his general idea for the project: "I hope that [*Los Olvidados*] will be something extraordinary in the current panorama of international cinema. It is harsh and rough and does not spare the audience. Realist, but with a subtle vigorous poetic vein, and at times erotic"<sup>2</sup>. *Los Olvidados* is the third film which Buñuel, after various failures, makes in Mexico. He had gone there to make a cinematic version of Garcia Lorca's play, *The House of Bernarda Alba*, but the project was never realized. In Mexico he meets the producer Oscar Dancigers and he is commissioned to do a series of jobs. The first is *Gran Casino* (1947), which is followed by *El gran calavera* (*The Great Madcap*, 1949) and, finally, *Los Olvidados*. Although Buñuel receives "commercial" commissions while in Mexico, it is not for this reason that he abandons the experimental character of his early work. As he had declared in Madrid during a 1935 interview:

If by saying commercial one implies a compromise in respect to one's normal quality of work, a general lowering of aesthetic standards, I refuse to direct such productions just as I have declined them when the occasion has presented itself in the past. However to realize a commercial film, one that will be seen by millions of people and whose story is an extension of that which characterizes my life, is a task which I consider myself fortunate to be able to undertake<sup>3</sup>.

These words are characteristic of the attitude with which Buñuel approaches many of his projects in this Mexican period, in particular films such as *Subida al cielo* (*Mexican Bus Ride*), *Èl* (*This Strange Passion*) or *Nazarín*. In these films there are already some features present in his later period. Due to the artistic freedom he had achieved as a successful director, the films of this later period are his most personal. Nevertheless, it is already possible to individuate the director's original voice in various details of *Los Olvidados*, a fact which shows his ability to investigate personal obsessions through commercial themes, inspired by operas about marriage rather than by political dramas set in the French colonies.

*Los Olvidados* was filmed in record time, in three weeks, with scanty means and actors assigned by the production house, but the genius Buñuel is able to come to terms with the genres of both melodrama and neorealism and their characteristic elements, always inserting, even if in small details, another

<sup>1</sup> Agustín Sánchez Vidal, "El largo camino hacia *Los olvidados*", in *Los olvidados: una película de Luis Buñuel*, México, Fundación Televisa, 2004, p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> Cit. in Alberto Cattini, *Luis Buñuel*, Milano, Il Castoro Cinema, 2006, p. 29.

more occult aspect, surrealist symbolism. In Mexico, the film does not receive immediately approval. It is projected in the cinemas for only four days and there is a violent reaction against Buñuel who is considered anti-Mexican. As he himself recalls:

After debuting in a pitiful manner in Mexico City, the film ran for four days, immediately prompting violent reactions. One of Mexico's biggest problems, today and in the past, is its extreme nationalism; a nationalism which betrays a deep-seated inferiority complex. Trade unions (this can also be translated as "mayors". It seems to make more sense as "trade unions" . Is this correct?) and various associations immediately called for my expulsion<sup>4</sup>.

The film gains success at Cannes thanks to Octavia Paz who went out of his way to defend it while attending the festival at the request of the Mexican government, . The acclamation which the film receives during a private projection at which many of the remaining surrealists are present -- among them Aragon and Breton, who meet there for the first time in twenty years since their break -- helps the film's reception and success<sup>5</sup>. *Le Monde* supports it while *L'Humanité* censures it. The critic Georges Sadoul claims he will not write a favorable review since the journal's direction considered it a bourgeois film and does so only after the soviet director Pudovkin writes a positive article in *Pravda*. Eventually, the film receives the prize for best director and only then is it accepted in Mexico<sup>6</sup>.

The screenplay is written together with the Spanish actor Luis Alcoriza, with the careful help of Juan Larrea. Oscar Dancigers, a Frenchman of Russian origins who moved to Mexico in 1940 in order to escape the Nazis, hires Luis Buñuel for his production house Ultramar. When Buñuel begins working on the project, he finds himself forced to conform to the impositions of the producer and the sensibilities of the country hosting him. Perhaps he achieves his objective by resorting to some old principles of his derived from leftist ideology and his surrealist experience, by organizing a narrative suited to any type of audience, but with an original backdrop. These three factors -- his history as an engagé director, the economic conditions at the moment in which the film is made and his surrealist background, constitute the main components of the film: the document; the existential tragedy of a group of abandoned children who live in poverty on the outskirts of a city, Mexico City; the surrealism present in all of Buñuel's films and here seen in the dream of Pedro. A truly realist director would have made a moralistic film, with a happy ending, but the solidity of his surrealist principles allows Buñuel to maintain an astonishing equilibrium between denunciation, narration and the questions left unanswered by the film (this seems to be a very vague sentence and I am not sure it has a lot of weight in English).

Buñuel's interest in the world of destitution, for those "forgotten" by society is not new, but dates back to his militancy on the side of the left, his participation in the militant activities of the Second Spanish Republic and his activities in the ranks of the republicans during the civil war (1936-'39). In 1933 he shoots *Tierra sin pan* (*Land without Bread*) a profoundly condemning geographic documentary on a Spanish region (and not the only one) forgotten in the wake of power and progress. It is a documentary which provokes a great scandal for its denouncement of the situation of extreme poverty and neglect in which an entire area of Spain lives, L'Estremadura, between Salamanca and Portugal. These denouncing images are precursors to what we will see in *Los Olvidados*. In one of the sequences of the film, we see the words a child writes on the blackboard of a neglected classroom: "Respect the property of others", a phrase which comes off as incredibly ironic if we consider the conditions in which the children live. Referring to the ignorant children who are destined to watch over the herds in Las Hurdes, the narrator (Buñuel) affirms: "the realism of Ribera never reaches this reality", since it is hunger, the lack of hygiene, poverty, and incest which are the principle causes of stupidity. This is indeed the world of *Los Olvidados*.

Buñuel is from a traditional, affluent family. He is educated in Saragozza, in religious schools. He goes to Madrid with the idea of becoming an agronomist, but realizes he is more interested in the humanities. Housed in a student dormitory, he meets Salvador Dalí, Pepín Bello and Federico García Lorca, who have a great influence on his formation at a key moment in his life. After his father's death, he moves to Paris and tries his luck in the film world. It is in this period in which, together with Salvador Dalí he shoots two fundamental surrealist films, *Un chien andalou* (*An Andalusian Dog* 1929) and *L'âge d'or* (*The Golden Age* 1930). The name of Dalí does not appear in the titles of the

<sup>4</sup> Luis Buñuel, *Dei miei sospiri estremi*, Milano, SE SRL, 1991, p. 212.

<sup>5</sup> Agustín Sánchez Vidal, *Luis Buñuel*, Madrid, Cátedra, 1991.

<sup>6</sup> Luis Buñuel, *Dei miei sospiri estremi*, op. cit., p. 212-213.

latter and the friendship between the two begins to deteriorate (is there a causal relationship between these two facts?). These films provoke harsh criticism from the more conservative circles of Paris. In spite of his male chauvinistic attitude, Buñuel falls in love with a young French woman rather evolved in her customs and taste, Jeanne Rucar. They marry in 1934. To realize these films Dalí and Buñuel develop filmic methods for narrating the subconscious with sensuality and humor. Many of the anxieties of the Aragonese director are condensed in the *L'âge d'or*: desire and its painful counterpart, fetishism. Interwoven with the latter, and the result of Buñuel's atheism, is religion. He is surprised by news of the end of the war in Hollywood, where he arrived in 1938 in order to supervise two films on the Spanish war, which are never carried out. He remains without work; unable, however, to return to Spain. In January 1941, he is hired as advisor and supervisor of editing for documentaries by the Center for Inter-American Relations at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, but loses the position because of his political history as a leftist agitator and, in part, due to the memoirs of Salvador Dalí, in which he is accused of being anti-religious. After a stint in Hollywood, Mexico opens its doors to him. The difficult success of *Los Olvidados* allows Buñuel to make commercial cinema with a certain surrealist content. Indeed, he begins his career as an avant-garde filmmaker and ends it in quiet the same way, with wonderful films like *La fantôme de la liberté* (*The Phantom of Liberty*). Surrealism represents a decisive moment in the life and work of Buñuel. As he writes in his memoirs, for him surrealism was an encounter with a new moral system:

For the first time in my life I had found a coherent and thorough moral system, impenetrable. (...) surrealist morals, aggressive and clairvoyant in nature often offended common morals. Our morals (...) exalted passion, mystification, insult, dark humor, the call of the abyss<sup>7</sup>.

Buñuel remains faithful to these principles his whole life. This is seemingly more difficult, yet at the same time more obvious in the genre films he makes.

#### *A Reading of Los Olvidados (The Forgotten Ones)*

Buñuel carries out intense research during the two years that he is without work after the failure of *Gran Casino*. He has time to get to know Mexico City and to study the archives of a reformatory. He makes *Los Olvidados* (1950), a horrifying reflection of Mexico City in its most atrocious and impoverished reality. "The first projection of the film in Mexico -- writes Agustín Sánchez Vidal in his biography of the director -- provokes violent reactions and even a motion for Buñuel's expulsion from Mexico by many different groups: newspapers, trade unions (see previous comment about trade unions/mayor), associations. It remains on the bill for only four days and there are even attempts to physical harm the director himself"<sup>8</sup>. Nevertheless, it is a film which, in appearance, follows the principles of Neo-realism. *Los olvidados* comes out at the same time as films like Vittorio De Sica's *Sciuscià* (*Shoe Shine* 1946), *Ladri di biciclette* (*The Bicycle Thieves* 1947), and *Miracolo a Milano* (*Miracle in Milan* 1951), Roberto Rossellini's *Paisà* (*Paisan* 1946), Visconti's *La terra trema* (*The Earth Trembles* 1948). The initial off-screen voice introduces a level of generalization which seems to be an attempt to set up a connection with these films. It begins with an allusion to the issue of abandoned children in big cities (New York, Paris, London). The camera then swings down on Mexico City. The narrator's voice warns us that "a film based on real-life facts, is not optimistic". He seems to be telling the spectator that they are about to see a moralizing film of a documentary nature, with an apparently neorealist style. Very quickly, however, we notice a considerably level of ambiguity. I would like to focus on two aspects of the film: the constellation of conflicts which define the relationship among its characters and its use of surrealist elements.

The fact that the film is focused on a marginal part of society, makes it almost claustrophobic. Only in three moments (the first apparition of Jaibo, the pedophile who attempts to seduce Pedro, the silent cinema scene which we see from within a shop window, and the exit of Pedro from the Granja to go and buy cigarettes) do we see scenes in the street which do not take place among the shacks of the periphery or its abandoned buildings. Throughout the entire film we see only two positive characters: Pedro and the director of the reformatory. Pedro stubbornly searches to escape the world of poverty, but in order to do so he must overcome insuperable obstacles: his mother's abandonment and indifference and Jaibo's fatale harassment. It is this character who steals his mother's affection from

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 117.

<sup>8</sup> Agustín Sánchez Vidal, *Luis Buñuel*, op. cit. p. 175.

him. The emotional triangle between the mother (Marta in the screenplay), Pedro and Jaibo, in typical Buñuelian fashion, is perfidious. It does not reach the extremes of *Viridiana* (1961) (a nun, her male cousin and the maid), a film in which sex and religion are combined in an old Buñuelian formula: "sex without sin is like an egg without salt". Pedro is the first and the oldest of the "olvidados" (the forgotten ones). When he is unjustly accused of stealing a knife from the laboratory in which he works, the mother tells a policeman: "Punish him until he has learned his lesson"<sup>9</sup>. Jaibo has stolen the knife, an episode which provokes a seemingly endless flight finishing in the reformatory. When Pedro, pressured by Jaibo, flees from the reformatory it is this very action which will inhibit him from proving to the director that he is on the path to redemption. Pedro's impulse to rectify himself is concentrated in the phrase directed at his mother: "I would like to behave well, but I do not know how" (54'). After having threatened her with a stool, he accepts his detainment, is taken to the secretary and from there is sent to the Granja school. The director of the reformatory's character is the main defect the communists found in the film. Buñuel is accused of giving the character too positive of an image. Georges Sadoul states it in this way: "In the end, in the reformatory, he shows a director who is very kind, very human, who allows the young boy to go out to buy cigarettes."<sup>10</sup> He is isolated in the middle of desperate, marginal characters.

There is instead something primitive and bestial which drives the actions of the other characters. This fact is underlined, not only by the total lack of affection displayed amongst them, but also by the presence of elements which hark back to a pre-industrial society. Violence, death and wounds are inflicted with stones, knives, and clubs. There is a regression of civilization; a demonstration of the degree to which these characters have been "forgotten"<sup>11</sup>.

Don Carmelo is one of the adults who lives in poverty at the margins of society. He is a figure who represents certain aspects of the ancien régime. In all of his interventions, he never tires of speaking of his nostalgia for another time, that of Don Porfirio Díaz, the Ex-general-president of Mexico, in which children were punished as they should be. Every time he pronounces Don Porfirio Díaz's name he takes off his hat, in a symbolic gesture of his respect for the man (fig. 2). Towards the end of the film, when he hears Pedro accuse Jaibo of being responsible for Julián's assassination, he exclaims: "They should hang all these criminals up by their feet". In other words, they should hang them like dead chickens at the market. In another scene he says, referring to the children: "*Cría cuervos*". The rest of this proverb, known to anyone who speaks Spanish, is "*y te comerán los ojos*". The saying (*Cría cuervos* is also the title of a 1976 Carlo Saura film) warns against the dangers inherent in imparting a bad education<sup>12</sup> and in this case sounds even more tragically ironic, seeing as how it is a blind man to pronounce the phrase. Figures of blind people, handicapped people and invalids often appear in Buñuel's films. The scene in which the legless man moves around with his handcart and is left crying for help on the ground, after being violently robbed by the children, is in fact completely gratuitous. On the handcart reads "you were looking at me", which seems to be an allusion to the other invalid in the film, the blind man. In the final scene Don Carmelo, after hearing the shots which kill Jaibo, exclaims: "One less. They should kill them all before they are born".

Due to his age and his brute force, Jaibo appears to be the leader of the group of young delinquents. From his very first appearance, the group alludes to him with great respect due to his criminal past. The first images of Jaibo confirm the suspicion that he is a tough "*callejador*" (good-for-nothing) who is in control (fig. 1). But in reality he is a cowardly drug dealer, who flees every time he sees the police. This will be the defining feature of his movement around the neighborhood and his interaction with the other boys: escape, exploitation of the others, aggression and betrayal.

The character of the mother conducts a wretched life: a widow with four children, the youngest born many years after the death of her husband. The level to which the mother neglects or "forgets" her son Pedro is particularly dramatic because he is the consequence of her having been raped when she was fourteen. The only moment of affection which she shows him is when she realizes, while in prison, that Pedro is telling the truth about not having stolen. One of the most intense scenes of the film is in the jail when Pedro stops pretending to be an adult. After his mother kisses him on the head, he calls to her, but she has already gone away. The travelling shot of the mother which finishes in a fade out on the black uniform of the police officers, indicates the state of abandonment in which Pedro lives.

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<sup>9</sup> Or when Pedro returns home briefly after having worked in an equestrian circus: "Why have you returned? It would have been better if you had stayed where you were." (54')

<sup>10</sup> Luis Buñuel, *Dei miei sospiri estremi*, op. cit., p. 213.

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. Alberto Cattini, *Luis Buñuel*, op. cit. p. 34.

<sup>12</sup> Translated literally: "If you raise ravens and they'll pluck your eyes out".

In the film there are four pairs of couples. The first is made up of Pedro and the mother. The difficult mother-son relationship could be the origin of the problems which afflict Pedro. We know that he is the result of her having been raped; an unwanted son who only creates problems for the mother. Meche and Ojitos are the only characters who are still innocent. The basic relationship between Ojitos and Don Carmelo is characterized by the latter's exploitation of the former, a minor abandoned by his parents because they were unable to feed him. The relationship is also an allusion to an archetype of Spanish literature, *Lazarillo de Tormes*, who guides a blind man in one of the episodes of the novel. In the film there is an opposition between the two boys, Pedro and Jaibo, friends turned enemies. In 1915, André Bazin wrote that the former has an innate pureness: "he is the only one who crosses the mire without the mud attaching or penetrating him" (have these Bazin quotes been translated in English? If so, I will most likely not have access to them here in Italy). Jaibo on the other hand is "evil, sadistic, perverse, a cruel traitor who does not inspire disgust, only a sort of horror"<sup>13</sup>.

There is also a kind of opposition between the world of adults and that of the children. Meche and Ojitos are the only characters who are not, at least for the moment, conditioned by the perdition of the world of poverty which surrounds them. Don Carmelo constantly mistreats Ojitos. The mother does not consider one of her children and shows clear preferences (this sentence seems to be missing a direct object in the Italian).

Buñuel's dedication to surrealism is present in many aspects of the film. One of the most significant scenes is Pedro's dream, which functions as a visual manifestation of his crisis. The figure of a hen plays an important role in the dream, but it is not the only bird which appears in the film. Almost all of them have a profound significance which goes beyond being simply a representation of rural life within the center of the city. After being beaten with clubs by three boys (Jaibo, Pedro and one of their friends) Don Carmelo, laid out on the ground, runs into a hen which observes him, while the atonal sound of out-of-tune violins gives emphasis to the scene (11'). It is a typical "Buñuel" moment, which means nothing in itself, but which contains the deep meaning of the film: a direct allusion to a society in which children and adults behave like animals. The following sequence shows Pedro, at his house, caressing a hen. Then, at the Granja, the director lets Pedro work with the hens after reading in his booklet that he is very good with animals. In one of the references to magic and superstition, in line with the tastes of Buñuel, we see Don Carmelo try to heal a poor sick woman by passing a live pigeon over her back. When the pigeon dies, it will carry the ailments of the woman away with it (23').

Pedro gets scared when a rooster climbs on the fence around his house and stares at him (40'). He chases him off, but immediately afterwards we hear the voice of the father of his friend Julián who has been killed by Jaibo. He goes around, drunk, asking everyone who has killed his son. A minute later, the rooster runs into the hen house and is chased off by Pedro's mother who strikes him with a broom, provoking a second of hysteria on the part of Pedro who asks his mother to stop hitting him. The parallels between this scene and the assassination of Julián are obvious, as are those with the following scene in which Jaibo kills Pedro. When the mother is seduced by Jaibo she is on her knees and chicks are seen eating in the room behind her.

There is another important scene in which a hen appears: in Pedro's dream (29), in which the central tensions of the film are concentrated and in which the role of this animal as a symbolic element are expanded (fig. 3). Already in *Tierra sin pan (Land without Bread)* one of the first scenes showed the decapitation of a rooster as part of an ancestral rite associated with matrimony. The hen is shown flying in slow motion, while it loses its feathers. It is also shown de-feathered, as when the mother offers it as raw meat. The dream sequence contains an oedipal desire. His mother offers him a piece of raw meat which resembles a de-feathered hen (fig.4), but it is taken away from him by Jaibo who comes out from under the bed, in a prefiguration of the theft of maternal-filial love in the scene of seduction<sup>14</sup>.

When Pedro is at the Granja, we see him in the hen pen, eating an egg. He is reproached by a friend because he tries to impose the laws of the street, the only ones he knows. He is unable to accept the principle of solidarity and the new order in vigor inside the reformatory. After fighting with another boy, he is left alone in the hen house. He grabs a stick and with two blows he kills two hens. Feathers fly up again. In this case the birds are meant to reflect the isolation of Pedro in this place of "cure". In the end, as Pedro goes up the stairs of the barn at his house, a hen wakes Jaibo who then kills Pedro

<sup>13</sup> André Bazin, *Che cosa è il cinema?* Milano, Garzanti, 1986, p. 204.

<sup>14</sup> Per un'analisi approfondita di questa sequenza, si veda Mark Polizzotti, *Los olvidados*, London, BFI, 2006, o Alberto Cattini, *Luis Buñuel*, op. cit. p. 35.

out of revenge for having reported him to the police. All of the "figli della violenza" (the Italian version of the title translatable as "sons of violence") die a violent death. And, like the blind Don Carmelo had prophesized, both the victim and the accuser end up metaphorically hung up by their feet in front of our eyes.

How to "read" the film?

There are three possible ways to read the film. The first is that of the nationalist Mexicans who were angry with Buñuel and who only grasped the most superficial level of his denouncement of this disagreeable reality. The second possibility is to do a bourgeois "social" reading of the film as many French communists have. Or as a denouncement of a situation: in life one must be aware, one must "know how to say no". Both of these readings following, although with different outcomes, the postulates of neorealist cinema. There is then a third reading which considers the first two: a surrealist reading<sup>15</sup>. The film, in fact, is organized on two levels, "realist" and "subliminal", each of which functions in its own way. This allows us to do two different readings: one which sees the film as a "denouncement" and the other as "surrealist". That which is however truly extraordinary about the film is that Buñuel is able to combine these two aspects. The "subliminal" underworld is evident in the various oedipal situations, and also in the repetition of movements such as those of the arms which strike the body following the obsessive rhythm of the music (here it would sound better if you could mention the owner of the arms -- it reads strange in English as such). Buñuel is thus able to unite surrealism with a Spanish tradition which grasps the "tragic sense of the human", present in Goya and in Miguel de Unamuno. In the film there is a vicious circle of violence. The characters are the offspring of violent acts (rape), who perpetuate other violent acts (killings). They find themselves at a dead end, in a situation of abandonment in which they have been forgotten, causing the most extreme and hypocritical aspects of modern society in the big cities to surface, in a representation of a human reality without hope. But we are also shown Jaibo, an evil man who rebels against the entire world, who denounces the cynicism of a false and hypocritical society -- ours!

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<sup>15</sup> Per una lettura del reale, basata su Lacan, si veda Julián Daniel Gutiérrez-Albilla, "Fictions of Reality/Documents of the Real Encounter: Mise-en-abîme and the Irruption of the Real in Luis Buñuel's *Los olvidados* (1950)", *Hispanic Research Journal*, 8, 4, (September 2007), pp. 347-357.