

Los Olvidados

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Luis Buñuel is one of the most curious figures in the history of the cinema. Between 1928 and 1936 he made only three pictures, and of these, only one, *L'Age d'Or*, can be considered a full-length film. Yet these few strips of celluloid are undoubtedly among the classics of the cinema, and certainly, along with *Blood of a Poet*, among the few avant-garde works to have aged gracefully. And they are among the rare films of major importance to emerge from the surrealist movement.

Land Without Bread, Buñuel's semi-documentary on the miserable people of Las Hurdes, carried on the ideas set forth in *Un chien Andalou*; indeed, the impassive objectivity of the journalistic approach far surpassed the horror and force of the mere dream-world. The donkey stung to death by bees achieves that mobility of vision found in the old barbarous mythology from the Mediterranean, every bit as well as the dead donkey on the piano. In this kind of boldness, Buñuel resembles one of the grand old men of the transition era between the end of the silent and the emergence of the talking film. Only Vigo, in spite of the small body of his work, can be compared to Buñuel. And yet, for a space of 18 years, Buñuel virtually vanished from the cinema. Unlike Vigo, death did not cut short his career. As far as we knew he had simply been swallowed up by commercial work in the new world, or perhaps in order to make a living, he was grinding out obscure third-rate pictures in Mexico.

Now, suddenly, here is a new film, signed by Buñuel. Oh, yes, a grade B film, a production ground out in a month on a short budget. But a film, at last, in which Buñuel has had a free hand in developing his own screenplay, his own directing and editing. It

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is like a miracle. After 18 years, and from the other side of the world, the old Buñuel sends us a message, faithful to *L'Age d'Or* and *Land Without Bread*, a message that lashes the spirit with its red-hot wires, and leaves the conscience no room to draw a breath.

The theme, on the surface anyway, is the same that, since the appearance of *Chemin de la vie*, has served as a model for all films dealing with juvenile delinquency: misery makes an evil counselor, and redemption comes through love, trust, and hard work. The fundamental optimism of this theme is, first of all, a moral optimism, on the order of Rousseau's, which proposes an innate goodness in man and a paradise of innocence in childhood, laid waste before it is ripe by an adult world. But it is also a social optimism, which suggests that society can repair the evil it has done through reeducation. In the rehabilitation center, a social microcosm founded on the trust, order, and brotherhood from which the young delinquent was too early weaned, the adolescent can be reestablished in his original innocence. In some ways this system works not so much to reeducate as to exorcise and convert. Psychological truth, garnered by experience, is not the main point. The static thesis on ravaged childhood, from *Le Chemin de la vie* and *Le Carrefour des enfants perdus* to *L'Ecole buissonnière* (the character of the dunce, in particular) indicates that the central idea is the creation of a moral myth, a sort of social parable whose message is intangible.

But now *Los Olvidados* injects a new element; it warps the unfolding of this myth. Pedro, a difficult inmate of a model farm, is given the opportunity to prove himself worthy of trust. He is given a pack of cigarettes and money to buy sausages, like Mustapha in *Chemin de la vie*. But Pedro does not return to his open cage, not because he wants to steal the money and run away, but because he allows himself to be robbed by Jaibo, the evil companion.

You will notice that the myth is not contradicted ideologically, from within. It cannot be. If Pedro had broken faith, the director of the farm would still have been able to tempt him to right action. It is, objectively, much more grave that the experience strikes from without, and against Pedro's will, because in that case society is saddled with full responsibility—first, for having cor-

rupted Pedro to begin with, and second, for having endangered his well-being. It is a good thing, the film seems to say, to set up model farms where justice, work, and brotherhood reign. But as long as injustice and sorrow remain unchanged in the environment, the evil persists. It is the evil of the objective cruelty of the world.

These references to films about wayward youth, however, illuminate only the most superficial aspect of a film that is, at base, fundamentally different. This is not the time to unravel the conflicts between the explicit thesis and the more profound ones; it is enough to point out that the first of these is significant only as a painter's subject is significant. For beyond the conventions (which he often takes up only to destroy) the artist perceives a transcendental truth, both moral and sociological—the metaphysical reality, if you will, of the cruelty of the human condition.

Los Olvidados is a great film precisely because it does not depend upon moral absolutes. There is no trace of Manichaeism in the characters; their guilt is fortuitous; their destinies cross like swords. Certainly, on the psychological and moral levels, Pedro is basically good and fundamentally pure. He is the only character who crosses this sea of filth without being sullied by it. But even Jaibo, the bad boy, who is sadistic, cruel, perverse, and treacherous, does not inspire repugnance so much as a kind of horror that is not incompatible with love and pity. He is like Genêt's protagonists, except that the author of *The Miracle of the Rose* deals with an inversion of values that we do not find in Buñuel's film. Buñuel's children are beautiful, not because they are good or bad, but simply because they are children, in crime as in death. Pedro is brother-in-youth to Jaibo, who betrays him and beats him to death. And although each becomes what his childhood experiences make of him, they are equal in death. Their dreams are the measure of their destinies. Buñuel performs the remarkable feat of recreating two dreams in the worst tradition of Freudian-Hollywood surrealism. And yet he brings us to horror and pity. Pedro runs away because his mother refuses to give him a piece of meat when he asks for it. Then he dreams that she gets up in the night and offers him a whole quarter of beef, raw and dripping blood, but that Jaibo, hidden under the bed, snatches it away. We can never forget this piece of meat, palpitating like

some ghastly sea creature, offered by a mother who smiles like a madonna. Neither can we forget the miserable, mangy mongrel who crosses and recrosses Jaibo's consciousness as he lies dying in a shadowy no-man's land, his forehead crowned in blood. Buñuel has furnished us with the only contemporary aesthetic expression of Freudian symbolism that works. The surrealists used it too self-consciously; we cannot respond to symbols too obviously and arbitrarily chosen. By contrast, in *Un Chien Andalou*, *L'Age d'Or*, and *Los Olvidados* these psychological situations are presented in all their profound and irrefutable truth. Whatever the plastic form Buñuel gives to the dream (and in this case, it is highly ambiguous) his images pulse with the life and feeling of dreams. The dark, thick blood of the unconscious circulates in these scenes, and drenches us, as if an artery had been opened into the soul.

With both children and adults, Buñuel avoids making judgments. If adults are more generally wicked, it is because they are more entrenched in misfortune. No doubt the most shocking aspect of this film is that it dares to show the lame and halt without making them pathetic. The blind beggar, tormented by the children, avenges himself by turning Jaibo over to the police. A legless cripple who refuses the children cigarettes is robbed and left to lie on the pavement at some distance from his cart, and yet he is clearly no better than his tormentors. In this world where misery reigns, where everyone scuffles for life however he can, there is no scale of misfortune. We are taken beyond good and evil, and even further beyond happiness and pity. The moral sense which some of the characters seem to possess is only, at bottom, another accident of fate, a drop of purity and integrity which the others do not happen to have. It does not occur to the privileged ones to reproach the others for their evil ways any more than they try to defend them. These people have no reference except life itself, this life we think we could domesticate with our moral and social order, if only the social disorder of misery would cease to exist. We live in a sort of infernal earthly paradise, its exits blocked by swords of fire.

It is absurd to reproach Buñuel for having a perverse taste for cruelty. True, he does seem to choose situations for their paroxysms of horror. What more awful sight can be imagined than a

child stoning a blind man, unless it be a blind man revenging himself upon a child. After Pedro is slain by Jaibo, his body is tossed into a nameless ravine along with a spill of garbage and wastes, dead cats, and empty cans. And the people who get rid of him by throwing him there are among the few who have cared for him, a little girl and her father. But the cruelty is not Buñuel's. He is only revealing the cruelty that exists in the world. If he has chosen the most horrible examples, it is because the real problem is not whether good exists, but how deep into the sphere of misery human life can go. He probes the cruelty of creation itself. This theme was already evident in *Land Without Bread*. It makes little difference whether or not the miserable Hurdanos were truly representative of the Spanish peasant. They undoubtedly were. But they represent, first of all, the misery of all mankind. Thus it is possible, between Paris and Madrid, to measure the very limits of human degradation. Not in Tibet or Alaska or South Africa, but right in the Pyrenees, men like you and me, heirs of the same civilization, members of the same race, have become degraded, cretinous goatherds, subsisting on green cherries, and too brutish to brush the flies from their faces. It does not matter that they are an exception. It is enough that it is possible. Buñuel's surrealism reaches to the bottom of reality. We feel it. It knocks the breath out of us, like a diver weighted down with lead, who panics because he might never again feel solid earth beneath his feet. The dreamlike nature of *Un Chien Andalou* plunges us into the human soul. In *Land Without Bread* and *Los Olvidados* we explore man in society.

Yet the cruelty in Buñuel's work is entirely objective; it is nothing more than lucidity, nothing less than despair. And though pity is absent from the aesthetics of his films, compassion is a basic ingredient of his work as a whole. At least this is true of *Los Olvidados*, for it seems to me that this film represents a change of concept and a development since the appearance of *Land Without Bread*. The documentary on the Hurdanos was not devoid of a certain cynicism, a complacency that lacked objectivity; and in it the absence of pity becomes an aesthetic provocation. *Los Olvidados*, however, is a film of love, and it demands love. Nothing could be more unlike existential pessimism than



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Buñuel's cruelty. Because it evades nothing, concedes nothing, because it dares with surgical obscenity to make an incision in the corpus of reality, his cruelty can rediscover humanity in all its grandeur, and compel us, by a kind of Pascalian dialectic, to love and admiration. Paradoxically, the predominant feeling that emerges from both *Land Without Bread* and *Los Olvidados* is the impression of an incorruptible human dignity. In *Land Without Bread*, a mother sits, immobile, holding on her lap the body of her dead child. And the face of this peasant woman, coarsened by poverty and sorrow, has all the beauty of a Spanish Pietà, in which nobility and harmony combine. In the same way, the most hideous faces in *Los Olvidados* never fail to be human. The presence of this beauty in horror (and it is not simply the beauty

of horror), the sublime endurance of human nobility in the midst of decadence, transform that cruelty into acts of love and compassion. And it is for this reason that *Los Olvidados* does not affect us adversely, with either sadistic complacency or false indignation.

It is not possible to avoid touching on the surrealism in Buñuel's films. He is, indeed, one of the rare valuable representatives of this mode. But it would be a mistake to accord it too great a place in his work. His surrealism is a part of the rich and fortunate influence of a totally Spanish tradition. His taste for the horrible, his sense of brutality, his tendency to delve into the utmost extremes of humanity—these are all the heritage of Goya, Zurbaran, Ribera. And above all, it reflects a tragic sense of life, which these painters expressed through the ultimate human degradations: war, sickness, misery and decay. But their cruelty, too, served only as a measure of their trust in mankind itself, and in their art.