Buñuel and Mexico

The Crisis of National Cinema

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Buñuel's Macho-Dramas

> I am pure Mexican, and I have made a pledge with the land where I was born, to be a *macho* among *machos.*
>
> —José Alfredo Jiménez, from the *corrido,* "Soy Puro Mexicano"

The critical portrayal of men in Buñuel's films *El Bruto (The Brute), Él (This Strange Passion),* and *Ensayo de un crimen (The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz)* turns the instability of national politics and the economy into metaphoric renditions of troubled men. These three male protagonists engage respectively in homicidal, paranoid, and surrogate homosexual behavior: all clear violations of the Mexican patriarchal image of "wisdom, strength, courage, perseverance, self-control, dignified reserve, protection of the weak, punishment of wrongdoing."[1] Buñuel's leading men are evidently troubled in these movies, and because of an "agreement" that implicitly regulates the man's image vis-à-vis that of the state, the provocation of centering on male protagonists who are clearly "unstable" is another way of referring to the crisis of the 1950s. Not only is there an apparent crisis of the image of patriarchy in these films, but also and perhaps even more significant, there is a crisis of masculinity. Buñuel addresses these issues in his macho-dramas *El bruto* (1952), *Él* (1952), and *Ensayo de un crimen* (1955), emphasizing the correlations between his troubled men and the image of a state in crisis. Because the dramatic plight of these characters involves negotiations of masculinity, I have chosen the term *macho-dramas* to characterize the films in which they appear. One is a comedy *(Ensayo de un crimen),* and the others are melodramas, but they are all about men in crisis.

Scholars of the Mexican Revolution and Mexican culture have defined *machismo* as something that is closely associated with the nation's identity. From the misogynist implications inscribed in the nation's foundational myth of the treacherous mother, La Malinche, to the construction of a male-centered historical discourse around the heroes of the Revolution, Mexican culture and politics have granted to the macho male the banners of national stability and political power.[2] Ilene V. O'Malley has analyzed some of the

workings of political propaganda around the heroes of the Revolution, particularly the "bandit," or outlaw, types exemplified by Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa. O'Malley writes: "The propagandists frequently praised the heroes for their manliness, attributed all the virtues of the ideal patriarch to them, and set them up as father figures. . . . This masculinization of the heroes of the regime encouraged a transference of the feelings they inspired to the government itself."[3] As long as patriarchy and machismo are put to work for the good of the nation (represented by a seemingly "stable" home where men, women, and servants—the latter often played by Indians—know and respect their place in the hierarchy), they are not only acceptable but beneficial practices. This is the case, for example, of the long line of actors who played the benevolent patriarchs of the family melodramas (where Buñuel's leading man Fernando Soler became iconic). Safekeeping the stability of the nation-home seems to be the key symbolism of men in power in Mexican cinema.[4] In his book, *Cinema of Solitude,* Charles Ramírez Berg characterizes machismo as one of the pillars that sustains Mexican society:

> *Machismo* is the name of the mutual agreement between the patriarchal state and the individual male in Mexico. Through it the individual acts out an implicit, socially understood role—*el macho*—which is empowered and supported by the state. The state in turn is made powerful by the male's identification with and allegiance to it. . . . More than a cultural tradition *machismo* is the ideological fuel driving Mexican society. . . . To speak of the male image in Mexico is to speak of the nation's self-image and ultimately to speak of the state itself.[5]

Not only is there an "agreement" between men and the state, according to Ramírez Berg, but the male image is a stand-in for that of the nation-state, and consequently we can say that what we do to a man, we do to the nation. It's up to women to provide the means, the locus for men to test and prove their status and thus legitimize the nation, whether they want to or not. The Macho is often tested through his exercise of power over the women in his life.

According to Jean Franco, La Malinche as a paradigm is "inevitable" in national culture because Mexican national identity and the colonial complex are structured around the mythical female character. This also provides the basis for the implied misogynist treatment of women (in history and fiction), as well as part of the rationalization for Mexican machismo. In her book, *Plotting Women,* Franco writes:

> The problem of national identity was presented primarily as the problem of *male* identity, and it was male authors who debated its defects and psychoanalyzed the nation. In national allegories, women

> became the territory over which the quest for (male) national identity passed, or at best . . . the space of loss and of all that lies outside the male games of rivalry and revenge.[6]

Thus, the violation of the male figure as symbolic of balance, justice, prosperity, and stability necessarily speaks about the nation, in the same way that female figures become the symbols of crisis and trauma. Berg also states that in Mexican cinema of the 1970s (the focus of his book) the male image was in crisis, in response to the political and economic instability that followed the (second) oil boom of the 1970s. Years earlier, however, Buñuel's macho-dramas were questioning the theme of male crisis as a form of national narrative.

El bruto

El bruto was written directly for the screen by Buñuel and Luis Alcoriza, who also co-wrote *El gran calavera, Los olvidados,* and *La hija del engaño.* Buñuel gave the title role to one of the major figures of classic Mexican cinema, Emilio Fernández's favorite leading man, Pedro Armendáriz (star of *I Am Pure Mexican,* the movie, as well as *Flor Silvestre, María Candelaria,* and many others). In this movie, however, Armendáriz played a villain from the slums. The decision to cast Armendáriz completely against type (and, uncharacteristically, without his mustache) was already a form of revision: he inevitably brought with him many years of stardom as the quintessential noble, manly, virtuous, handsome, almost picture-perfect, masculine hero in dozens of films. In *El bruto* (which in Spanish also means dumb, or slow-witted), by contrast, Armendáriz plays a slow-thinking thug who is hired by an evil landlord to bully his rebellious tenants, who are resisting his eviction orders.

In the tradition of the *arrabalera* melodramas of directors like Ismael Rodríguez *(Nosotros los pobres)* and Alejandro Galindo *(Campeón sin corona),* Buñuel's *El bruto* explored a number of fashionable social topics. Like some of Galindo's movies, *El bruto* is about the impotence of the urban poor against the law and private interests, and the need for poor people to organize themselves to fight injustice. But what seems more provocative in this film is the tampering with the image of the male protagonist, both through Pedro Armendáriz's star-persona and through the character's relationship with women (significantly, the character's name is also Pedro).

In the movie, Pedro, "the Brute," is a butcher at Mexico City's major slaughterhouse, El Rastro. He is hired by the landlord Andrés (Andrés Soler, of *El gran calavera*) through the intervention of Andrés's young wife,

FIGURE 13. Class conflict and masculinity are fatally linked in *El Bruto* (1950). In this film Buñuel cast one of national cinema's secondary patriarchs, Andrés Soler *(left)* and one of Mexico's greatest unblemished movie stars of the 1940s, Pedro Armendáriz. Museum of Modern Art / Film Stills Archive.

Paloma (Katy Jurado, of Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon*), to scare off Andrés's rebellious tenants so that he can sell his property to urban developers. More than the obvious reflection on the problems of rapid urban growth in the early 1950s, a topic familiar to Buñuel, who lived in the city and who had already directed a number of films on this theme, *El bruto* seems to follow a similar type of gritty realism. However, *El bruto* is more clearly melodramatic and shows the protagonist in a slightly more positive light. (Unlike *Los olvidados,* there will be redemption for "The Brute," who dies repentant for his crimes trying to save the poor neighbors.)

The politics are not subtle in this movie: the landlord Andrés, upset and frustrated by the tenants' rebelliousness, blames "the Revolution" for his problems. Complaining about his tenants, he says: "It's the fault of the politicians. Now any bum thinks that he has rights. I wish I had the power to crush that bunch of revolutionaries." Don Andrés is only one in a long line of ambiguous leading men in Buñuel's Mexican movies who blame the Revolution or its aftermath (like the land reforms of the 1920s and 1930s that affected the upper classes) for their personal downfall. Like the old antiques dealer in *Una mujer sin amor,* like don Guadalupe in *Susana,* like don Eladio in *Subido al cielo,* and like the evil blind man don Carmelo in *Los olvidados,* don Andrés is a character who represents reaction, backwardness, and moral ambiguity. Also like his predecessors, Andrés faces some kind of sexual dysfunction that characterizes his frustration and triggers his actions. In this case, his young wife Paloma, probably half his age, denies him sexual favors while at the same time she tries to seduce the Brute.

In order to serve his boss properly and to be closer to Paloma, Pedro abandons his "family" in the poor neighborhood where he lives. His family is actually composed of a very young mistress, her bedridden, chain-smoking mother, her crippled uncle, her brother who is a bum, and some unidentified children, all of whom live off of the Brute. There is no sympathy for this family when Pedro picks up his things and leaves with no explanation. On the contrary, they are portrayed as parasites. The sickness and unemployment that surrounds them seems to be a matter of their own choice: as long as someone will keep them, there is no need for work. The interesting thing here is that, unlike the children in *Los olvidados,* the grownups in *El bruto* seem to have some options, like work and organization, as demonstrated by the tenants' alliance against don Andrés. The law protects the powerful, though, which makes the complaints of don Andrés somewhat moot. But don Andrés is old, weak, bitter, and attached to a young, unfaithful woman, all of which makes him an unlikely patriarchal figure. Furthermore, Andrés still lives with his father, a buffoonish character who is senile, silly, foul-mouthed, and childish all at the same time. The old man runs around in his pajamas and a beret, speaking with a thick peninsular Spanish accent. The father (played by the Spanish actor Paco Martínez) is clearly a caricature and his Iberian origin marks Andrés as a creole, a Mexican of direct Spanish descent (which was, indeed, the actor Andrés Soler's origin; he had been born in Mexico to Spanish immigrant parents). Andrés's lineage emphasizes his class difference with his tenants and the Brute. Andrés's patriarchal role is in crisis: his masculinity is in question, his property is endangered, his lineage is a joke. He needs Pedro to complement for his lack, especially since it is suggested that Pedro is actually Andrés's illegitimate son, the result of an illicit affair with a long-gone domestic servant.

Pedro supplies the sexual and physical power that Andrés is lacking. He intimidates the tenants with his brutal force and becomes Paloma's lover in the process. Making matters even more melodramatic, Pedro then falls in love with Meche, the daughter of the tenants' rebellious leader, whom he accidentally killed. ("Meche" and "Pedro" are the same names as the protagonists of *Los olvidados.*) Meche heals Pedro when he is stabbed after he is chased and attacked by the tenants. He is immediately attracted to her youth, sweetness, and motherly protection. He ultimately leaves Paloma and don Andrés to move in with Meche. Paloma catches the two of them together, and in the argument that follows, Pedro beats up Paloma. Paloma then accuses Pedro of having raped her, and when don Andrés confronts the Brute about the rape, Pedro kills him, crushing Andrés's head with his foot. (In the absence of legitimate heirs, Don Andrés's death could make the tenants' claims easier.) Paloma then leads the police to Pedro's hiding place. When the police encounter Pedro, he displays a gun, and he is killed at the end.

Pedro's relationships with don Andrés, Paloma, and Meche are all governed by illicit sexual liaisons: Andrés with Pedro's mother, Pedro with Paloma, Pedro with Meche. It is Pedro's sexual activity that places him in a weakened position when Paloma stakes her claim, and, once rejected, she turns him in to the police. Sexual prowess and physical force ultimately work against the macho Pedro. The Brute is a character that operates outside of both patriarchal and state law. But he is not an entirely villainous character: like the protagonist in *Susana,* he is properly punished for his crimes, yet unlike Susana, and unlike Jaibo in *Los olvidados,* Pedro does show remorse and the willingness to make amends for his actions.

Nevertheless, portraying Pedro as a tragic yet sympathetic antihero was not easy. While the character himself was ultimately redeemed by love, remorse, and ignorance, Buñuel had to deal with Pedro Armendáriz's star persona, which was complicated by the unwritten laws of star-discourse. "As a general rule," says Buñuel in *My Last Sigh,* "a Mexican actor would never do on the screen what he wouldn't do in real life." Armendáriz, remembers Buñuel, "refused to wear short-sleeved shirts . . . because this article of clothing was reserved for homosexuals." And another famous anecdote from the set of *El bruto* recounts how some lines of dialogue had to be changed because Armendáriz refused to say them as they were scripted, again because he thought they could be misconstrued as suggesting homosexuality. Eventually, Armendáriz agreed to wear the short-sleeved shirts, at least in the slaughterhouse scenes, and there were no major repercussions to his macho star-persona.[7]

This tension between actor and character was rare in Mexican cinema. A star's persona and typecasting were instrumental in the success of Mexico's genre system. Pedro Armendáriz, since Emilio Fernández cast him in his first feature film,[8] had come to symbolize "essential Mexicanness," either as an Indian or as a Revolutionary general. Allowing Buñuel to miscast him in a role Armendáriz thought might compromise his star-persona and male identity suggests two things: first, that with the foreign critical and commercial success of *Los olvidados* and *Subida al cielo,* Buñuel had achieved a comfortable position within Mexican cinema that allowed him to attract top talent (Armendáriz and Katy Jurado, for instance) and to take certain liberties; and second, that Buñuel was now less hesitant to articulate in his films his concerns about the image of the macho Mexican.

Before *El bruto* Buñuel had already depicted machismo, in a joking manner in *La hija del engaño* and as an irrational instinct in *Susana.* Furthermore, in his autobiographical account, *My Last Sigh,* he frames his discussion of *El río y la muerte* as well as his personal impressions of Emilio Fernández and Pedro Armendáriz by digressing on the subjects of Mexico's macho image and its "gun culture."[9] This character of "The Brute" was somewhat misleading when it came to his male personality: he was physically strong but slow-witted, "masculine" but easily manipulated by women, powerful yet only able to exert his strength on women and sick old men. Pedro fails in the role of the lower-class male who protects those who depend on him (his first concubine, the sick mother, the children), as he takes sides (temporarily) with the sexually disempowered petty bourgeois patriarch.

This attitude stands in opposition to the image of men of Pedro's own class seen in Mexican culture at the height of the Revolution. According to Ilene O'Malley, "Tales of class abuse were frequently portrayed as the usurpation of a man's patriarchal rights. . . . Lower-class men recovered their manhood during the Revolution by assaulting the socioeconomic structures that had oppressed them."[10] Masculinity and class conflict were closely associated issues during the Revolution. Don Andrés, the middle-class but disempowered patriarch, blames the Revolution specifically for giving the lower classes the impression that they had the right to question Porfirian patriarchal authority and class differences. Ultimately, however, don Andrés's defeat occurs in the sexual arena (Paloma denies him her sexual favors but grants them to the Brute) rather than as a result of his legal problems. Interestingly, O'Malley suggests that the Revolution allowed *all men* (rich and poor, creole and mestizo) to believe that they had the right to claim a place in the patriarchal structure. Thus, in a cynical way don Andrés is right about his class worries, as is Buñuel's interpretation of his fears.

Later, Pedro, in an attempt to redeem himself in the eyes of Meche, switches sides to help the tenants in their struggle to stay on the property. He is inevitably led to his death, betrayed by Paloma and ungratefully forgotten by the people that he tried to protect. It is relevant to note that Pedro's change of heart is not a response to any sudden awakening of class consciousness, as would be more acceptable in Mexican cinema, but is

strictly the result of his interest in a woman, which confirms O'Malley's perception that "class conflict received a . . . sexual expression"[11] in revolutionary times. Buñuel's cynical choice for an ending (Pedro is killed by the police, and in don Andrés's absence the tenants are probably free to stay in the property) clearly distances this movie from its closer generic relatives, Ismael Rodríguez's *arrabaleras.* Buñuel denies us even the possibility of a happy ending, and also the film is not very sympathetic to the poor as a class. Redemption is as useless for this Pedro as it was for the homonymous character in *Los olvidados.* Interestingly, producer Sergio Kogan reportedly asked screenwriter Luis Alcoriza to tone down the conflict between Pedro and the neighborhood people. According to Ávila Dueñas, they feared that Mexican audiences would not tolerate a working-class character that betrayed his own people.[12] The film's intriguing final images show Paloma running away from the dying Pedro and coming face to face with a rooster standing on a fence. The image is a return to a Buñuelian motif seen in *Los olvidados* and other films, a "nightmarish vision," says Buñuel, which in this case suggests Paloma's own punishment for her selfish, destructive actions. Like the blind man don Carmelo, who ends up in a similar situation in *Los olvidados,* Paloma is left alone to face her own nightmare.[13]

In *El bruto,* Buñuel uncovers a social, patriarchal, and masculinity crisis that is made explicit by the miscasting of Pedro Armendáriz, by the lack of positive patriarchal figures, and by the inability of the law (that is, the Revolution) to protect the poor, the dispossessed. Yet, Buñuel's misuse of Armendáriz was not limited to the actor's character; it also addressed Armendáriz's symbolic status in the nation's cinema. Buñuel deliberately uses self-reflexive irony in a scene when Pedro goes looking for Meche to make her his live-in companion. Pedro sweet-talks the newly orphaned Meche, who is destitute and only in her late teens, convincing her to move in with him, in part for protection, in part as his concubine. She accepts (she really is out of options) and Pedro, overtaken by joy, smiles broadly, stands up triumphantly, and utters in celebration the unbelievable line, "*¡Qué chulo es México!*" (How lovely is Mexico!). Pedro is strategically and ironically standing on a pile of rubble, surrounded by dirt, garbage, and (as the homonymous character in *Los olvidados*) half-demolished buildings. In its visual context the line of dialogue acquires a doubly insulting meaning. On the one hand, the mise-en-scène is unambiguously unattractive (as are many similar locations in *Los olvidados* and *El bruto*). On the other hand, coming from the lips of Pedro Armendáriz, the iconic, untarnished, symbolic star of such emblematic films as *I Am Pure Mexican* (Emilio Fernández, 1942), *María Candelaria* (Fernández, 1943) and *Juan Charrasqueado*

(Ernesto Cortázar, 1947), it is aggressively incompatible with his role as a star-persona in the nation's cinema.

Moreover, by 1952, Buñuel was starting to work his way around censorship with apparent ease. The censorship laws of 1949 made it illegal in Mexican films to portray national institutions as ineffective, to celebrate illicit sexual affairs, or to use profane language in film. All of these forbidden topics are thinly disguised in *El bruto*. Pedro, for example, abandons what seem to be his illegitimate children and lives out of wedlock with two women. The police arbitrarily serve the needs of a "villain" in this film, at the expense of the dispossessed. And don Andres's father, the buffoonish old Spaniard, is constantly cursing. His words are doctored with slight syllabic variations that turn *puñeta*, or "jerk-off" (a common Spanish curse word) into *puñales*, or "knives" (which has no meaning as a curse word). These deceptive pleasures, along with the specific and implied references to class conflict and revolutionary politics, situate *El bruto* as a turning point in Buñuel's Mexican career.

Buñuel's next project was *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1952), a U.S.–Mexico co-production in which Buñuel, for the first time since *Gran Casino*, departed from the genre models of Mexican cinema. With the biggest budget and the longest production schedule of his entire career, *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* became Buñuel's first color film, his biggest commercial success to date, and his first movie since 1946 that was not limited by the genres of Mexican cinema.[14] *Robinson Crusoe* was a clear departure, and one of the films that Buñuel clearly did not make specifically for the domestic market.

Él

Upon returning to Mexican cinema after *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, Buñuel made *Él*, one of his own favorite films, and one in which he retook the issues of masculinity and class conflict dramatized in *El bruto*. Like *Una mujer sin amor*, *Él* was based on foreign literature, the semi-autobiographical novel of the same title by Spanish author Mercedes Pinto. Yet, Buñuel's interest in the crisis of Mexican male identity in *Los olvidados* and *Una mujer sin amor*, his commentary on machismo and class in *El bruto*, along with inevitable questions of context, make *Él* a careful look at machismo and patriarchy, this time as a psychological ailment, as paranoia. Because of the implied weight of machismo and patriarchy in Mexican politics and identity, *Él* becomes a very critical look at those issues, since, paraphrasing Charles Ramírez Berg, what Buñuel did to the male image in Mexican cinema, he also did to the nation's image.

Many interesting things have been written about Francisco Galván de Montemayor, the pathetic, insanely jealous husband in *Él*, played by Arturo de Córdova, a distinguished Mexican leading man. Francisco's psychological profile has been the subject of criticism, praise, and speculation from sources as diverse as Max Aub, who interviewed Buñuel about his interest in psychoanalysis, to Jacques Lacan, who discussed Francisco as a faithful portrait of a paranoiac, to Charles Tesson of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, to Linda Williams.[15] Fernando Césarman, a psychologist at the National Autonomous University in Mexico, provides one of the most rigorous analyses in his book, *L'oeil de Buñuel*, in which he concludes that Francisco "suffers a progressive psychological disintegration as his heterosexual relationship intensifies." Francisco's potential homosexuality is presented as a symptom of his paranoid delusions that lead him to imagine all sorts of infidelities by his wife. Most tellingly, Césarman states that Francisco suffers from "a chronic homosexual problem. . . . His relationships with women are reduced, whereas they are more stable with men."[16] Buñuel's portrait of a paranoid is, in fact, faithful to the case of Dr. Schreber, which Freud made famous in his treatise "Psychoanalytic Notes . . . of a Case of Paranoia,"[17] particularly in the associations drawn by Freud between paranoia, homosexuality, and delusions of grandeur. Like Dr. Schreber, Francisco is a classic paranoid whose neurosis is manifested in his belief that everybody is out to get him, and who exists in a realm of moral superiority (in Francisco's case, transformed into Catholicism and patriarchy), and who has difficulty relating to women. Gripped by fears of his wife's infidelity, Francisco forges a rather intimate relationship with his valet (played by Manuel Dondé of *Subida al cielo*) and confesses to him that he was happier before ever having had relations with a woman. He physically and psychologically abuses his wife, Gloria (played by Argentine émigré actress Delia Garcés), which constitutes the clearest instance of faithfulness to Mercedes Pinto's novel. Francisco is, however, commended for his righteous ways by his priest, his valet, his male friends, and even his mother-in-law, who refuses to believe her daughter's complaints. By the time it is clear that Francisco has crossed over the threshold of sanity, which comes only after he attacks his priest in church, his only refuge is a monastery abroad, where Francisco finally "confirms" (upon meeting his ex-wife's new husband) that he was right about her infidelity all along. Thus, Francisco is a faithful rendition of a paranoiac, at least in the Freudian sense of the word, and in any case, Freud's case was Buñuel's model. Yet, to look at Francisco also as a Mexican man does not invalidate the psychological profile of the character; it just gives it some added relevancy in the light of Buñuel's specific views about men and machismo in Mexico.

Interestingly, in what seems like a trend in Buñuel's Mexican movies of the 1950s, the paranoid don Francisco in *Él* is something of an old Porfirista": he is a devout Catholic, a "Knight of the Sacred Sacrament," and the wealthy, conservative, tradition-minded heir of an "old" family fortune.[18] Yet, Francisco, who seems too mature to be a bachelor, soon shows signs of an arbitrary character flaw: in discovering an affair between his valet and a maid, he fires the maid. Francisco is further emotionally distressed by an old lawsuit that his lawyers tell him he is going to lose. The lawsuit, which we learn Francisco has been fighting for years, concerns the restitution of lands expropriated from his family in the city of Guanajuato. Indeed, our first glimpse of Francisco's erratic temperament comes in the second scene of the movie, when his lawyer tells him that the documents upon which Francisco is basing his claim are "too old" and that the lawyer fears there is no way they can win. Francisco fires the lawyer on the spot. The choice of Guanajuato as the site of Francisco's claims is also significant: since the 1700s the city has been an enclave of silver mining and had also served as the administrative and economic center of the Bajío region, both of which accounted for the aristocratic aura and enormous wealth of the city's "old" families . Therefore, Francisco's origins certainly mark him as someone from a privileged background, and consequently as someone who sees the Revolution as a threat. It is implicit that his lawsuit concerns lands expropriated by the government, especially in light of Buñuel's use of characters with similar social concerns in *El bruto, Una mujer sin amor,* and *Subida al cielo.* Francisco is one of the wealthy landed elite directly and adversely affected by the Revolution's land reforms of the 1930s.

Francisco's family home—a baroque-styled mansion with a taste of Antonio Gaudí, that gives the decor an expressionist function,[19] seems to reflect his skewed perception of reality. But the house, designed by his grandfather and decorated with objects purchased at the Paris exposition of 1900, like Francisco's moot lawsuit and his nostalgic honeymoon trip to Guanajuato, also signifies his propensity toward living in the past. By contrast, Francisco's romantic rival, Gloria's former fiancé Raúl, is a young engineer who builds bridges and dams out in the country. These distinctions between "old guard" and "modern" Mexican men are not only common in Buñuel's movies, but they are also surprisingly consistent. As we saw earlier in *Susana, La hija del engaño, Una mujer sin amor, Él, El río y la muerte,* and *Ensayo de un crimen,* the younger heroes of Buñuel's films are men educated in implicitly progressive occupations, like agronomy, mechanics, and engineering, especially significant in the decade of modernization. Furthermore, don Guadalupe in *Susana,* Quintín in *La hija del engaño,*

FIGURE 14. Patriarchy, masculinity, and insanity are the same thing in Buñuel's *Él* (1952). Francisco Galván de Montemayor (Arturo de Córdova) is symbolically trapped by his past, his present, and by the schizophrenic architecture of his own home. Museum of Modern Art / Film Stills Archive.

Rosario's husband in *Una mujer sin amor,* and Francisco in *Él* all try stubbornly to hold on to their moral positions and the mode of production prevalent before the Revolution. By contrast, the younger men who threaten the old ways and the old masculinity are all immersed in the wave of progress and modernization. This is most clearly suggested by the choice of two bridge-building engineers of the same age group to meddle with the marriages of young women to older men in the similarly structured melodramas *Una mujer sin amor* and *Él.*

Francisco's diagnosis of paranoia is well founded and documented, according to the analyses essayed by critics such as Fernando Césarman and Charles Tesson. But, whereas in Mercedes Pinto's novel the anonymous married couple's crisis seems to take place in a time and place vacuum, giving it a strictly psychological angle , in Buñuel's film Francisco and Gloria are unmistakably placed in a Mexican context in the 1950s. Francisco is still a man going insane, but as written by Buñuel and his collaborator Luis Alcoriza, he is also a man whose masculinity is threatened, both by women and by the presence of younger men (to whom Francisco seems attracted). He is, moreover, a failed Mexican patriarch who has lost his land and (also in contrast to Pinto's novel, in which the couple has a child) who does not produce an heir.

Francisco is implicitly feminized by impotence, and he is disempowered by the loss of his property and the end of his family name. He also represents the crisis of machismo: he is written as an unmistakably Mexican man (from an old, Catholic, landed Guanajuato family) and, by extension, he dramatizes the crisis of the Mexican state. Indeed, the suggestion in *Él* of Francisco's homosexual inclinations (which are confirmed by Freud's own study on paranoia),[20] along with the brief family history that the movie supplies, portrays the psychological crisis of one Mexican man as the trauma of the entire Mexican patriarchy.

By the time he directed *Él,* Buñuel's inclination to treat Mexican issues or crises metaphorically as personal traumas had become a pattern in his Mexican films. We see it in the relationship of Pedro and Jaibo in *Los olvidados,* in doña Carmen and the aging patriarch don Guadalupe in *Susana,* in Rosario's traumatized older son in *Una mujer sin amor,* and in Pedro's homicidal impulses in *El bruto.* In 1954 Buñuel utilized this national crisis/male trauma scenario in depicting the mother/son relationship in *El río y la muerte.* A year later, Buñuel would give us the amusing portrayal of the decadent aristocrat Archibaldo de la Cruz, played by Ernesto Alonso, in a version of Rodolfo Usigli's elegant novel, *Ensayo de un crimen.*

Ensayo de un crimen

Rodolfo Usigli's novel—in which the main character is actually named Roberto de la Cruz—was published in 1944, and the author intended it to be a profile of a gratuitous, brilliant murderer set in the "real" Mexico City of gentlemen, well-dressed ladies, and tea rooms of the 1940s. That is, the location was to have been a "more European" Mexico City—the city as it was before the urban boom of the 1950s brought the poor to the city from the hinterlands, before the advent of *Los olvidados.*[21] In spite of its snobbish tone, the novel has been praised for its remarkable re-creation of Mexico City landmarks and of upper-class genteel customs. Usigli describes in painstaking detail many of the daily traditions of the Mexico City of the 1940s—like breakfasting at the Casa de los Azulejos, and leisurely afternoon walks from the Alameda Central along Paseo de la Reforma to the Chapultepec forest. The author even sometimes used the real names and addresses of people and places from the period, describing the particularities of a restaurant's menu or the doings of crowds and people with journalistic accuracy.

In Usigli's novel, Roberto de la Cruz is the wearied son of a fine (but now destitute) Cuernavaca family, who lives off of gambling and a small trust allowance. Purely out of boredom, and convinced that he is an intellectually superior person, Roberto decides that there are people who do not deserve to live, and that, as a greater being, he is allowed to kill them. Roberto thinks of himself as something of an aesthete. In his mind, his crimes really have no need for motive. On the contrary, they must be executed coldly and cleanly, and with no moral qualms whatsoever.

In Buñuel's film, the main character has been re-named Archibaldo de la Cruz, in part because of a dispute with Usigli, who was unhappy with Buñuel's adaptation of his novel. Instead of being "based on" Rodolfo Usigli's novel, the movie is credited as having been "inspired by" the novel. Moreover, its title was changed to *La vida criminal de Archibaldo de la Cruz* for the purposes of foreign exhibition. Buñuel later clearly stated that he was not familiar with the setting and lifestyle described in Usigli's novel, and that, for his film, he had been solely interested in the obsessions of the book's main character.[22]

Yet, as Buñuel had done in adapting the paranoid hero of Spanish author Mercedes Pinto's novel, so, too, for *Ensayo de un crimen,* Buñuel gives us a great deal more information about the main character's history than ever appeared in the novel. In the novel, Roberto de la Cruz's story is loosely based on a real homicide case in Mexico City in the 1940s, and his character is modeled after the infamous American murderers, Leopold and Loeb. In the film, Buñuel suggests that Archibaldo de la Cruz's homicidal impulses originated in a traumatic childhood experience. In the film's opening scene, original to the adaptation, Archibaldo narrates his background and family history over a flashback of his childhood, which includes a specific reference to the Revolution. The reference is much less precise in the novel. All Usigli wrote about the Revolution in the novel is one sentence: "He remembered his childhood in the quiet provincial city, with the exception of the slow and at the same time vertiginous years of the revolution."[23] Screenwriters Buñuel and Eduardo Ugarte, by contrast, open their film with a shot of pictures from a book about the Revolution, where, over images of numerous corpses and general chaos, the narrator tells us: "We were going through one of many violent moments of the Revolution. Throughout the country parties were rising up in support of one side or the other. The provincial capital where I used to live with my parents was one of the few places where there was still some peace."

This disjuncture between Archibaldo's description of his childhood town and the photographs in the book suggests the same kind of narration/image juxtaposition that Buñuel exploited in *Las Hurdes* and *El río y la muerte*. Unlike Roberto de la Cruz in the novel, in Buñuel's film Archibaldo's homicidal desires are specifically linked to the Revolution. Archibaldo's governess finds him hidden inside an armoire, wearing his mother's clothes and shoes. At the same moment, an armed skirmish between indistinct factions in the war is occurring on the street outside. A stray bullet comes in through the window and accidentally kills the pretty young governess. Archi's nanny dies right in his presence. She falls dead on the floor, displaying her legs and thighs, which attract Archi's attention even more than the bleeding bullet wound on her neck. Seconds before, the governess had been telling Archibaldo a made-up story about a king who killed people with the sheer force of his desire, and now Archi is convinced that he caused the nanny's death because the thought crossed his mind.

In this original introduction, Buñuel has given Archibaldo a psychological history that includes an aristocratic family that "benefited from the Porfiriato and was made destitute by the Revolution,"[24] an early propensity for cross-dressing, and the impressive memory of a woman's death that takes place under erotic circumstances. The result is that Archi will forever connect, or confuse, sexual desire with death and vice versa. Out of this first scene comes the association between the political turmoil of the 1910s, Archi's latent homosexuality, and his desire to kill women (as well as the comical impossibility that he will ever realize that desire). Here, Buñuel seems to be completing the picture of the Mexican male crisis begun in *Susana, A Woman Without Love,* and *Él,* but now with a more systematic feminization of the leading man. Like Francisco in *Él,* Archibaldo is portrayed as someone with a disturbed personality, but whereas Francisco's character is understood through a serious clinical study on paranoia, Archibaldo's is more of a cartoon: effeminate, frustrated, impotent.

None of this is explicit in Usigli's novel. Roberto de la Cruz is certainly egomaniacal and narcissistic, but he is not completely sexually dysfunctional with women. In fact, in the novel, Roberto occasionally relates with women, and he also wants to kill men, specifically, the old count Schwartzemberg, who Roberto suspects to be a homosexual. Therefore, in the movie, Archibaldo de la Cruz's one-sided fixation against women makes the character somewhat less complex, his trauma more explicit, and the diagnosis more certain. Archibaldo is most likely a repressed homosexual, the antithesis of the masculine hero demanded by Mexican machismo. We know that Buñuel did not have very kind words for homosexuals, and he often used the term *pédéraste* in his writings, which implies he found a direct connection between homosexuality and pedophilia.[25] Thus, the choice

of Archibaldo as a parody of Mexican machismo is as prejudiced as it is straightforward.

Archibaldo is single, a dilettante who passes his time between leisurely courting the young Miss Cervantes, gambling in secret gaming houses, and making ceramic vases—a "feminine" hobby. He drinks milk, not alcohol; he likes music boxes, not guns; and his thin mustache, silk robes, fine suits, and elegant manners also characterize him as effeminate, or at least as a counterfigure to the manly images predominant in Mexican cinema. Furthermore, the choice of the actor Ernesto Alonso, a soap opera star who never married, added a dandy bachelor star-persona to Archibaldo's profile. In his floating narration Archibaldo states that he wants to marry Miss Cervantes, not because he loves her, but because he knows that marriage will "cure him." He tells Miss Cervantes when proposing marriage: "I am not a man like other men. I know my inclinations, and they scare me."

Archibaldo's homosexual/homicidal "inclinations" are frustrated constantly by external circumstances. Archibaldo can never fulfill his destiny as a great killer of women because his chosen victims always die due to external causes never directly related to his acts. A nun accidentally falls down a broken elevator shaft while he chases her; another woman commits suicide; and Archibaldo's fiancée, Miss Cervantes, is herself shot by her lover (an architect!) in the middle of her wedding to Archi (which interferes with Archibaldo's plan to kill her on their wedding night).

Implicitly, the impulse to kill women is sublimated by Archibaldo's homosexual inclinations, since his misogynist attitudes are a projection of his homoerotic desires. Like Francisco in *Él,* Archibaldo also conforms to specific descriptions of neuroses in Freud's writings. Freud specifically characterized neurotics as showing "inverted impulses, fixation of their libido upon persons of their own sex," as well as displaying "active and passive forms of the instinct for cruelty. . . . It is also through the connection between libido and cruelty that the transformation of love into hate takes place."[26] Thus, in Buñuel's (arbitrary) historically specific Freudian discourse, Archibaldo is typically a neurotic paranoid who constantly battles his "inverted" impulses by imagining violent scenarios. Archibaldo believes that forced heterosexuality through marriage to Miss Cervantes will have the reverse result and "cure" him.

Archibaldo channels his frustrations by picking visible fetishes, such as a music box, and a mannequin that resembles Lavinia, one of his potential victims. His plans to strangle Lavinia (played by the actress Miroslava Stern) are interrupted by the arrival of a group of American tourists who have come to see his ceramic vases. Archi instead burns the mannequin in his kiln and watches in ecstatic fascination as it melts in the flames. The mannequin and its obvious fetishistic value is probably the most-talked-about aspect of *Ensayo de un crimen.* More than a fetish, however, the mannequin is an actual "dead" version of the desired woman, and Archibaldo's "healing" process begins with the elaborate ritual of seeing her burn in the kiln. This is, indeed, as close as Archibaldo gets to fulfilling his desire. In a way, he succeeds in "killing" Lavinia, and the next time he meets with her, he is in fact "cured." The meeting occurs at the end of the film, after he has tossed his music box into the lake at Chapultepec forest, and Archibaldo and Lavinia walk away together. Unlike Francisco's famous lonely zigzagging walk at the end of *Él,* Archi walks away "straight" and in the company of a woman, showing that he is in fact "cured."

Archibaldo conforms to a psychological profile that seems to be resolved with the negotiation of his homicidal and homosexual leanings through the cleansing ritual of burning the mannequin. Nevertheless, Buñuel and Ugarte also emphasize the context of the Mexican Revolution in giving Archibaldo a psychological history. Archi's desire to kill and his homosexuality are linked to the death of the governess in the middle of a revolutionary battle. So, we also have to see this character as a version of Mexican masculinity in crisis. The first images shown in the film are photographs of the carnage of the Revolution as little Archi thumbs through a history book, and those are the images that frame Archibaldo's confession of his awakening as a killer. The editing of the film takes us from seeing the pictures of dead soldiers, to hearing the tune from the music box, to seeing the governess killed by a revolutionary's bullet. The final shot in the sequence is of Archi's morbid arousal, triggered by the sight of the dead woman's exposed legs. That sequence of events inevitably provides the explanation for Archibaldo's neurosis: sex and death, sure, but first of all, the Mexican Revolution.

In their film, Buñuel and Ugarte effectively heightened the specific historical context. They gave Archibaldo an added dimension: his neurosis may be drawn from a Freudian textbook, but he is also, unmistakably, a former Mexican aristocrat whose family was deprived of its wealth, position, and title by the Mexican Revolution. Ultimately, the traumatic experiences of the Revolution are at the root of Archi's problems. Like Pedro in *El bruto* and Francisco in *Él,* Archibaldo is a type of male leading character who is somewhat emasculated by the turn of events against his family and social class in the years since the Mexican Revolution. It is significant that Buñuel created these characters only after his immersion in the Mexican film industry had been solidified by the foreign success of *Los olvidados, Subida*

FIGURE 15. Ernesto Alonso as the troubled title character in *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz* (1955). Miroslava Stern *(right)* ultimately makes him walk "straight," although it takes sacrificing her own image to do so. Museum of Modern Art / Film Stills Archive.

al cielo, and *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe.* The emphasis on the characters' histories in specific Mexican contexts, such as the urban boom of the 1950s and the slow-moving lawsuits against the government's land reform policies, gives these films a peculiarly Mexican relevance that strict psychological studies (such as Aranda's) do not address. By subverting traditional male character types, Buñuel was holding up to the light his eternally favorite topics (violence, obsession) as well as his increased understanding of Mexico. These characters are machos in crisis, and they suggest the inability of the Mexican male to fulfill his "manly" responsibilities (or murder), as well as showing homosexuality or potential homosexuality as a sign of the weakening of patriarchy in the 1950s, and by extension, the crisis of the nation. Buñuel may have very well opened a revisionist trend in the nation's cinema with these films. Classical cinema had long before reached its peak: the cinematic image of the nation had already been put in question by Buñuel's own *Los olvidados,* and the state was facing its biggest economic and philosophical crisis since the 1930s.[27] Buñuel's films seem more

Mexican than ever, equating as they do the national crisis with masculinity. As Charles Ramírez Berg points out, in the two decades following the filming of Buñuel's macho-dramas *Él* and *Ensayo de un crimen,* the subsequent generation of Mexican filmmakers was even more open to using images of "weak," "soft" or openly homosexual men to refer allegorically to national crises.[28]

Buñuel had been in Mexico since 1946 and had evidently observed not only the meaning of machismo for the nation but also the customary reverential treatment given to patriarchal figures and leading men in the nation's cinema. As we saw in *Susana* and *La hija del engaño,* Buñuel had already explored the topic, using in both instances one of Mexico's favorite icons of patriarchy, the actor Fernando Soler. By mocking, deconstructing, and violating the male image, the macho-dramas make Buñuel's revisionism even more evident. Revisionism was also one way of revising the image of the nation and national cinema itself.

Conclusion

From Buñuel to "Nuevo Cine"

In a way, Buñuel was the antipode of Emilio Fernández.
—Alberto Isaac, in *Conversaciones con Gabriel Figueroa*

BUÑUEL AT THE MARGINS OF THE NATION

With *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* in 1952, Luis Buñuel broke new ground. By experimenting with a movie that was formally unlike anything in classic Mexican cinema, he earned respect for the adventure genre which belonged to the realm of B-type swashbucklers. *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe,* co-produced by Producciones Tepeyac (Óscar Dancigers) and United Artists (USA) opened the way for a number of international co-productions in the following decade. These, Buñuel made with foreign talent and usually released abroad, or they went directly to film festivals before being released in Mexico.

In 1952, for example, the original version of *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* was filmed in English and released in Paris, New York, London, Rio de Janeiro, and other major cities before it was dubbed into Spanish and released in Mexico in 1955. The Spanish version went on to achieve great recognition in Mexico, winning "Ariel" awards for best picture, director, screenplay adaptation (by Buñuel and Phillip Ansel Roll), production design, film editing, and supporting actor.[1]

After *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe,* Buñuel made three Mexican–French collaborations, *Cela s'appelle l'aurore (That Is Called Dawn)* in 1955, immediately followed by *La mort en ce jardin (Death in the Garden)* in 1956 and *La fièvre monte à El Pão (Fever Mounts at El Pão)* in 1959, and another Mexico–U.S. co-production, *The Young One,* in 1960, in which he collaborated with Hugo Butler. The critical and commercial success of *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* and *Viridiana* (which won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 1961) allowed Buñuel to confirm the viability and marketability of his style in the inter-