Buñuel's Box of Subaltern Tricks: Technique in *Los olvidados*

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Luis Buñuel's cinema is enigmatic and palimpsestic, and a paradigm of that multilayeredness is the scene in *Belle de jour* (1966) when an Oriental client takes a box into a brothel. Buñuel describes viewers' reactions to this scene in his memoirs:

> Of all the senseless questions asked about the movie, one of the most frequent concerns the little box that an Oriental client brings with him to the brothel. He opens it and shows it to the girls, but we never see what's inside. The prostitutes back away with cries of horror except for Séverine, who's rather intrigued. I can't count the number of times people (particularly women) have asked what was in the box, but since I myself have no idea, I usually reply, 'Whatever you want there to be'.
>
> --Buñuel, 1983, p. 243

Buñuel knows that we want to see what's in the box, and he teases us, inviting us to guess. But we will never know the answer.

Buñuel's life, like his films, was also full of surprises. When he went to Mexico in 1946, nursing his wounds after a disastrous experience in Hollywood, it looked on the surface as if his career had hit rock bottom. He had no illusions about what Latin America had to offer:

> I had so little interest in Latin America that I used to tell my friends that should I suddenly drop out of sight one day, I might be anywhere – except there. Yet I lived in Mexico for thirty-six years and even became a citizen in 1949.
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> --Buñuel, 1983, p. 197

Mexico in the 1940s was anything but a centre of bustling, innovative cinematography. That it was successful in commercial terms, though, there is no doubt. The Mexican movie industry had been going through a boom period under the administration of Miguel Alemán (1946–52), based on the Hollywood model. As Carl J. Mora notes:

> The major factor sustaining such a movie industry was the 'star system'. Mexican producers and directors were indeed fortunate in that during the 1940s and 1950s a fortuitous confluence of talented, charismatic, and attractive performers appeared who could assure commercial success for even the worst of films. The problem with this was that a motion picture became a vehicle for the star and consequently the director and the script became of secondary concern. This was the situation faced by Luis Buñuel when he arrived in Mexico in 1946 to work for Oscar Dancigers.

> --Mora, 1982, p. 75

Mora's spin is a positive one but it does not hide the fact that the actors and actresses were in the driving seat, the directors subservient to the exigencies of the show.

It was perhaps inevitable that Buñuel – a vulnerable foreigner down on his luck – would be enticed into making some Mexican melodramas of his own for purely commercial reasons: films such as *Gran Casino* (1946), *El gran calavera* (1949), *Susana* (1950), *La hija del engaño* (1951), *Subida al cielo* (1951), *El bruto* (1952), *Abismos de pasión* (1953) and *La ilusión viaja en tranvía* (1953). But he also bucked the trend by producing some extraordinary films such as *Los olvidados* (1950) and *Nazarín* (1958), which reflected the 'more personal interests and obsessions of the Surrealist auteur' (Evans, 1995, p. 36; for more information on Buñuel's Mexico period, see Pérez Turrent, 1995). In his more auteurist works Buñuel sought to hollow the Mexican melodrama out from within. The relationship he had with his cameraman neatly illustrates the point.

Gabriel Figueroa El Indio was by far the most famous cinematographer of the time – so much so that he once declared: 'I am Mexican Cinema' ['El cine mexicano soy yo'] (quoted in King, 1990, p. 48) – and the aesthetically beautiful landscapes in his films were seen as paradigmatically Mexican. The following comments of a contemporary critic are typical of the awe in which he was held at that time:

> Languid *maguey* plants, crepuscular love on the banks of the river, *charros* more macho than those in *Allá en el Rancho Grande* … All that seemed to characterise the 'national' was dramatised in El Indio's films, making up the cinematographic image of a nation.
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> --Quoted in King, 1990, p. 48

Mora provides a more balanced assessment of the techniques that formed the basis of El Indio's repertoire: 67

> Gabriel Figueroa's photographic preciosity incorporated all of the Eisensteinian techniques: low-angle long shots in silhouette that emphasize the stark landscape and sky and the smallness of the human figures before them; the close-ups of Indian faces and shrouded women; and the 'dead tree framing' in which long shots are composed between the gnarled branches of a dried-up tree.
>
> --Mora, 1982, pp. 79–80

Carlos Fuentes recalls that, when Buñuel and El Indio worked together in the 1950s, Figueroa would set up his rather precious camera shots and Buñuel would at the last minute divert the camera towards a barren landscape in the distance:

> While *Nazarín* was being filmed on location near Cuatla – or so the story goes – Gabriel Figueroa carefully prepared an outdoor scene for the director Luis Buñuel. Figueroa set up the camera with the snow-capped volcano Popocatépetl in the background, a cactus at the right-angle of the composition, a circle of clouds crowning its peak and the open furrows of the valley in the foreground. Looking at the composition, Buñuel said: 'Fine, now let's turn the camera so that we can get those four goats and two crags on that barren hill.'
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> --Quoted in King, 1990, p. 130

In effect in *Los olvidados* Buñuel turned from the sky to the stones, from the lush landscape of rural Mexico to the dry concrete jungle of Mexico City, from the noble Indian savage to the real Mexico City savage, Jaibo (Roberto Cobo). Rather than an antiphonal structure balancing stylised long shots with epic closeups of Indian faces, Buñuel employed a breathtakingly rapid narrative sequentiality mediated, as Edwards has pointed out with regard especially to the opening sequences of the film (1982, pp. 89–91), by the dissolve which, by keeping the old frame in focus as the new frame emerges, tended to promote an atavistic mindscreen, an Oedipal obsession with the preterite.

Made on schedule in twenty-one days – Buñuel had no leeway for error, as his autobiography indicates (1983, p. 200) – *Los olvidados* has a robust storyline about some criminals in an urban setting which has led some critics to see the film as the revamping of a picaresque tale.[1]While acclaimed at the Cannes Film Festival, its uncompromising view of the down-and-outs in Mexico City aroused fierce reactions from some Mexicans: 'Many organizations, including labor unions, demanded my expulsion, and the press was nothing short of vitriolic in its criticism. Such spectators as there were left the theatre looking as if they'd just been to a funeral' (Buñuel, 1983, p. 200). After a private showing of the film, Diego Rivera's wife, Lupe, refused to speak to him, and León Felipe's wife tried to maul him:

> Bertha Gamboa, León Felipe's wife, arrived; she was Mexican and with her nails all sharpened up, she was absolutely livid, like a harpy, intent on scratching my eyes out (I got scared, but I couldn't back down), she was shouting at me with her nails in front of her eyes: 'You scoundrel! You bastard! You swine! Those kids aren't Mexican! I'm going to get you deported! You low life!' She'd flipped.
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> [Llegó Bertha Gamboa, esposa de León Felipe, mexicana, con sus uñas afiladísimas, hecha una furia, una harpía, decidida a sacarme los ojos [yo tuve miedo, pero no me podía echar para atrás], gritándome con sus uñas delante de los ojos: '¡Miserable! ¡Canalla! ¡Puerco! ¡Estos niños no son mexicanos! ¡Voy a pedir que le apliquen el treinta y tres! ¡Granuja!' Fuera de sí.]
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> --Quoted in Aub, 1985, p. 119, my translation[2]

Buñuel's close friend, Sadoul, burst into tears at the premiere (Aub, 1985, p. 128). Faced with evidence such as this, we find ourselves asking: what was it about this film that evinced such a visceral reaction in the audience?

Los olvidados expressed a paradigm shift, since Buñuel brought with him a different mindset – European, surrealist – and Mexican cinema was, at the beginning of the 1950s, still playing out the last runs of its Golden Age years, the time of the Mexican melodramas, in which men were strong, women beautiful and love a word with a romantic aura. This was, perhaps, the main reason for the shock, since the characters in Buñuel's film are anything but stars. In fact, it would be difficult to think of a film in which the characters are more un-star-like; it is, as Octavio Paz pointed out, 'a star-less film' ['una película sin "estrellas"'] (1994, p. 223).[3] Both Jaibo and Ojitos were played by non-actors, after all. But its un-star-like quality went deeper than this. It is not that films do not portray unpleasant characters; they have to, if they want to create a sense of verisimilitude. It was simply that there are no redeemable characters in this film – with the possible exception of Julián (Javier Amezcúa) who is consigned to the oblivion of death early on anyway. Jaibo is instantly recognisable as the archetypal young villain, a Mexican version of Hollywood's Babyface.

Even the characters whom we expect to be good are just as corrupt. We expect sympathy to be engineered on behalf of Carmelo (played superbly by Miguel Inclán) when he is cruelly beaten up by the local gang, spearheaded by Jaibo, early on in the film. But then, later on, he shows himself to be just as quick to kick others when they are down, given half a chance. A latent paedophile, he tries to grope the young girl, Meche (Alma Delia Fuentes), when she sits on his lap, and he jumps at the chance to turn in Jaibo to the police. Pedro's mother, Marta (Stella Inda) also deviates from contemporary film mores. In his essay on the various mythologies of Mexican cinema, Carlos Monsiváis notes how women were depicted during the Golden Years: 'for a married woman, monogamy is the only guarantee of your existence; for a single woman, your honour is your only justification; for the prostitute, tragedy is your punishment and your only chance for glory; for the daughter, in your hymen I have deposited my honour and your future' (1995, p. 121). Yet Marta disrupts the codes of melodrama; she is beautiful, sensual and prepared to have a sexual relationship with Jaibo just, it appears, for the hell of it. And, in one of the most disturbing scenes of the novel, the dream sequence, when she offers her son some meat, and if we accept Peter Evans's convincing interpretation that she is offering him her 'torn vagina' (1995, p. 86), then she is offering sex to her son. Clearly we are poles apart from the victimised princess served up in the Mexican melodrama of the time. Even the staff behind the camera were adversely affected by episodes such as these. During the scene in which Pedro's mother rejects her son after he comes home looking for food, in Buñuel's words, 'one of the hairdressers quit in a rage, claiming that no Mexican mother would ever do such a thing'. One of the technicians asked him 'why I didn't make a real Mexican movie instead of this pathetic one', and Pedro de Urdemalas, 'a writer who collaborated with me on the script, refused to allow his name in the credits' (Buñuel, 1983, p. 200). Even his professional peers were shocked. The comments made by the Italian neo-realist, De Sica, after seeing the film, sound like those of a concerned relative: 'But, Buñuel, has society done something to you? Has it mistreated you? Have you suffered a lot?' ['Pero, a usted, Buñuel, ¿qué le ha hecho la sociedad? ¿Le ha tratado mal? ¿Ha sufrido

mucho?’] (Aub, 1985, p. 126). He even stayed behind to ask Buñuel’s wife, Jeanne, if he was a wife-beater. Lastly, and no doubt the final straw for those who had their doubts, the moral of the film seems quite clearly to indicate that social violence is perpetuated by example, and is inescapable. The closing sequence of *Los olvidados*, rather than enacting catharsis or promoting social justice, is simply the working out of the inevitable consequences of societal evil.

It is clear that the specific cinematic depiction of the Mexican subaltern in *Los olvidados* also has something to do with the violent reaction it caused in the audience. Here Gayatri Spivak’s theory of the subaltern helps to elucidate the dynamics at work in Buñuel’s film. In her important essay, ‘Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography’, Spivak begins by acknowledging the innovatory nature of the work carried out by the Subaltern Studies collective, headed by Ranajit Guha, in its aim to rewrite the history of colonial India from the bottom upwards. She goes on to argue that the group’s notion of the ‘consciousness’ of the subaltern, though, is problematic:

The plight of the subalterns in *Los olvidados*

> Because of [the] bestowal of a historical specificity to consciousness in the narrow sense, even as it implicitly operates as a metaphysical methodological presupposition in a general sense, there is always a counterpointing suggestion in the work of the group that subaltern consciousness is subject to the cathexis of the elite, that it is never fully recoverable, that it is always askew from its received signifiers, indeed that it is effaced even as it is disclosed, that it is irreducibly discursive.
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> --1985, p. 212

This means, as she goes on to suggest, that the retrieval of subaltern consciousness is mediated by what she calls the 'subaltern subject-effect':

> A subject-effect can be briefly plotted as follows: that which seems to operate as a subject may be part of an immense discontinuous network ('text' in the general sense) of strands that may be termed politics, ideology, economics, history, sexuality, language, and so on ... Different knottings and configurations of these strands, determined by heterogeneous determinations which are themselves dependent upon myriad circumstances, produce the effect of an operating subject. Yet the continuist and homogenist deliberate consciousness symptomatically requires a continuous and homogeneous cause for this effect and thus posits a sovereign and determining subject. This latter is, then, the effect of an effect, and its positing a metalepsis, or the substitution of an effect for a cause.
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> --Ibid., p. 213

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This, she contends, is an example of 'positivistic essentialism', even if it is politically 'strategic' (ibid., p. 214). *Los olvidados*, as we shall see, in articulating the consciousness of the Mexican subaltern, brings to the fore the indeterminacy and uncertainty involved in quantifying the observable. While ostensibly seeming to 'retrieve' the consciousness of Mexican subalternity for the benefit of its viewers, Buñuel's film simultaneously intimates that that very consciousness is, to quote Spivak, 'never fully recoverable' for it is 'effaced even as it is disclosed'. The film creates a 'subaltern subject-effect', whereby, as in *Belle de jour*, we see the external surface of the box but not its contents.

In *Los olvidados*, the role of the subaltern is occupied by the criminal class in Mexico City, epitomised by Jaibo, the (homin)id of Buñuel's pantheon of villains, at once a degraded *homo sapiens* and an expression of the animal, the id, the beast within. In this sense, we can see Buñuel's film as an intellectual product of an investigator who compiles information about his object of study, and subsequently promotes the knowledge thereby created for consumption by society at large. Buñuel, the researcher, creates knowledge about the forgotten remnants of society, that is he brings those sections of the society which are preconscious to consciousness. In fact he spent a number of months travelling around the shanty towns of Mexico City, watching, listening, thinking about the subject of his film:

> For the next several months, I toured the slums on the outskirts of Mexico City – sometimes with Fitzgerald, my Canadian set designer, sometimes with Luis Alcoriza, but most of the time alone. I wore my most threadbare clothes; I watched, I listened, I asked questions. Eventually, I came to know these people, and much of what I saw went unchanged into the film.
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> --Buñuel, 1983, p. 199

He sorted through records in a women's prison and a lunatic asylum: 'I went to mental asylums, I looked at a lot of files on beggars' ['Fui a clínicas de deficientes mentales, vi muchas fichas de mendigos'] (quoted in Aub 1985, p. 118). In one sense, thus, the film can legitimately be described as sociological study. So much is suggested by the voice-over just before the establishing scene of the film: [72]

> Big modern cities such as New York, Paris, London, hidden away behind their magnificent buildings, have poverty-stricken homes which contain ill-nourished, dirty children who do not attend school – breeding grounds for the delinquents of the future. Society attempts to remedy this evil but with limited success. It is only in the not too distant future that the rights of children and adolescents will be respected in order to make them useful members of society. Mexico City is no exception to this universal law. That's why this film, based as it is on real-life events, is not an optimistic one and sees the responsibility for solving this problem falling to the progressive forces within our society.
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> [Las grandes ciudades modernas, Nueva York, París, Londres, esconden tras sus magníficos edificios hogares de miseria, y albergan niños mal nutridos, sin higiene, sin escuela, semilleros de futuros delincuentes. La sociedad trata de corregir este mal pero el éxito de sus esfuerzos es muy limitado. Sólo en un futuro próximo podrán ser reivindicados los derechos del niño y del adolescente, para que sean útiles a la sociedad. México no es excepción a esta regla universal. Por eso esta película, basada en hechos de la vida real, no es optimista y deja la solución del problema a las fuerzas progresivas de la sociedad.]

The tone adopted here suggests that we are being presented, in the words of one critic, 'not with a fiction but with a closely observed picture of the real world' (Edwards, 1982, p. 92). We are, thus, initially lured into sympathising with the 'progressive forces of our society' – as epitomised by the director (Francisco Jambrina) of the reform school where Pedro finally ends up – which will contrive to 'remedy' the 'evil' depicted in the film. It is significant too that the cities chosen as an illustration in *Los olvidados*'s prologue are remarkably similar to those selected by Oscar Lewis in his later study of *The Children of*

Sánchez to illustrate a point about the pervasiveness of the culture of poverty. According to the American sociologist, there are 'remarkable similarities in family structure, interpersonal relations, time orientations, value systems, spending patterns, and the sense of community in lower-class settlements in London, Glasgow, Paris, Harlem, and Mexico City' (1965, p. xxvi). Like Lewis, Buñuel was depicting a social problem and thereby bringing it to public notice.

Despite the apparent similarity between the subject matter and its treatment in *Los olvidados* and *The Children of Sánchez*, is it fair, however, to see Buñuel's film simply in terms of the positivistic measurement of sociological observables? The extensive role played by the motif of concealment alerts us to the fact that this film does not offer untrammelled access to the Mexican criminal mind; the consciousness of the subaltern is, as we shall see, 'never fully recoverable' for it is 'effaced even as it is disclosed'. A clue is couched within the opening voice-over of the film which refers to how the poverty-stricken homes are 'hidden away' behind the magnificent buildings of the modern city. Even as the film displays the lives of Jaibo and his accomplices before us, it also hides them away.

The motif of concealment is more than simply a prelude to a later act of discovery, for it is at the centre of the film's rhetorical staging. Thus Jaibo conceals the rock with which he will kill Julián in a sling. When Jaibo has to flee from the police, he chooses to hide himself away in a disused slum by the railways. When Pedro runs away he has to conceal himself in the same area. Whenever Pedro is caught up by Jaibo, the latter invariably emerges from his hiding-place in the shadows. Similarly the juncture in the film when the viewer sees Meche's legs as she bathes them in milk (a scene echoed when Marta washes her legs), is revealed to be Jaibo's furtively voyeuristic point of view; immediately after the point-of-view shot Jaibo emerges from the shadows.

The dwellings inhabited by the various people in the story – Meche's household, Carmelo's house – are always depicted in semi-darkness. This could be an example of verisimilitude (the houses of the lower classes in the 1950s in Mexico City, of course, did not enjoy the luxury of electricity), but it is remarkable how consistently Buñuel chooses to depict interiors as dark and threatening, so much so that it becomes a leitmotif of the film. As viewers, we often struggle to see who is in each bed as the camera pans around the room. Even the interior of the knife grinder's shop where Pedro works is dark, whereas the furnace could have led to a brighter interior if the film director had desired such an effect. A high proportion of the scenes takes place at night, crucially at the beginning, when Ojitos (Mario Ramírez) is seen waiting all day for his lost father, and at the conclusion, when darkness becomes the natural accomplice to Pedro's murder. Paz's astute comment that *Los olvidados* depicts 'the nocturnal slice of life' ['la porción nocturna de la vida'] (1994, p. 233) betrays an awareness that Buñuel has consistently used the darkly lit stage set as a shorthand to express the darker, evil side of the human personality. Buñuel's cinematic enlightenment is counterbalanced by a gradual process of nocturnalisation whereby the brighter the light that shines on the subaltern the darker it appears.

These features, when taken together, suggest that concealment is a seminal rather than incidental component of the film's rhetorical strategy. It is surely significant that Carmelo should be blind. On a superficial level his disability makes him – like the amputee on the trolley – vulnerable to the predatory designs of villains such as Jaibo, and he therefore illustrates the tragedy of social inequality.[4] But his blindness is, I would argue, the outward manifestation of the underlying motif of concealment. Carmelo gradually grows in stature and symbolic density as the plot unfolds. Simply a vicious, blind old man at the beginning of the film, he is transformed by its conclusion into the conscience of society; his blindess thereby takes on a resonant, mythical quality. He enlists the help of the police, tells them where Jaibo lives (something, that no one with perfect vision would have been able to do), and, when the boy finally returns to his lair, Carmelo advises the police as to where to lie in wait: in an eerie way, he becomes, in effect, Jaibo's judge and executioner. As we hear the shots off-screen which finish Jaibo off, the camera cuts to a medium close-up of Carmelo's face as he pronounces the triumphant words: 'One less, one less. If only they could all die before daybreak' [Uno menos, uno menos. Ojalá mueran todos antes de la llegada del día]. Since this is a structurally important scene – the climax – we are drawn into seeing Carmelo as a Tiresias figure who, despite his blindness, is blessed with second sight.[5]

A number of critics have argued that Carmelo's blindness makes him an Oedipal figure. In the classical myth, Oedipus killed his father, Laius, unknowingly married his mother, Jocasta, and put out his own eyes when he discovered what he had done. His blindness signified the punishment meted out by the gods for his misdeeds. The Greek script, as filtered through Freud's epistemology, though, has been subjected to a number of important changes in *Los olvidados*, which might be expressed as follows:

1. Pedro (who is not quite Oedipus) does not sleep with his mother, though, as his dream suggests, he has harboured Oedipal fantasies about her, and is instead rejected by her.
2. Jaibo (who is not quite Oedipus) does not kill his father or sleep with his mother, but he does sleep with his friend's mother, at which point he becomes the surrogate father of his friend.
3. Pedro (who is not quite Oedipus) does not kill his father (Jaibo), although he attempts to do so; instead he is killed by his own father (Jaibo).
4. Carmelo (who is not quite Oedipus) nevertheless suffers his blindness; it is, perhaps, transferred – metaphorically speaking – to him from Jaibo as a result of the latter's misdeeds.
5. Marta (who is not quite Jocasta), does not hang herself. In fact, she simply walks calmly past while Pedro's body is transported on a donkey to the rubbish tip.

At a number of key junctures, therefore, the Greek/Freudian myth has been disrupted, transformed, ironised. The irony resides in the gap between the characters of *Los olvidados* and those of, say, Aeschylus's *The Oresteia*. The *grand récit* of the House of Atreus has become the miserable tale of a hovel in Mexico City.

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The most intriguing patchwork character, though, is Carmelo, since he puts us in mind of not only Oedipus but also (as mentioned) Tiresias. In that final scene in which he mouths his triumphant words, Carmelo becomes the voice of society which, via the juridical system, condemns 'los olvidados' to death, and – metaphorically speaking – to societal invisibility. The rather enigmatic message contained on the invalid's trolley – '*me mirabas*' – draws attention to the ways in which, as viewers of films or as spectators of the social fabric, we sometimes cannot see what we are/were looking at. *Los olvidados* hints at the idea that we are often blind to what we do not want to see (for example, the physically deformed, the mentally deformed, the subaltern).

Given the enigmatic symbolism attached to the realm of the visual in general and the eyes in particular in Buñuel's work (one has only to think of the slitting eye sequence in *Un chien andalou*),[6] it is significant that the character who is designated as the outsider early on in the film should be called 'Ojitos' (Big Eyes). There is an important scene in the film when Ojitos, who is bewildered and sad because his father seems to have abandoned him to his fate, is bullied by the street gang, first, because he is a foreigner (a '*forastero*') and, second, because he stares at one of the street boys. This sequence is important because Ojitos is given prominence as a displaced projection of the camera eye, which studies others and, in effect, 'stares' at them. The gang's aggression towards Ojitos is, indeed, a projection of the aggression of the subaltern when threatened by the gaze from without, a gaze that, as we shall see, includes the camera eye.

In order to understand the nature of the gang's aggression towards Ojitos I need to make some preliminary comments about the role of violence throughout the film. The overwhelming presence of physical violence in *Los olvidados* has been noted by various critics. Francisco Aranda has argued that violence in this film is both excessive and monotonous, and indeed that, for this reason, the film has been overrated (Edwards, 1982, p. 19). Most of the violent scenes are unadorned in terms of musical accompaniment (there is hardly any), backdrop (there are never stylised stage sets), or filler scenes (the onward march of the plot has a Racinian nakedness to it). Violence, which Buñuel has admitted as being the 'central theme' of his work (Aub, 1985, p. 151), is presented in Sadean terms as having its own justification, that is, a *raison d'être* based on the voice of nature. As we read in *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*: 'What voice other than that of nature incites our personal hatred, our desire for vengeance, war, in a word, the constant motive for murder? If, therefore, she advises us thus, she has her reasons for doing so' ('quelle autre voix que celle de la nature nous suggère les haines personnelles, les vengeances, les guerres, en un mot tous ces motifs de meutres perpétuels? Or, si elle nous les conseille, elle en a donc besoin') (Sade, 1909, p. 240).

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The worst, and possibly the most famous, violent scene is the one which occurs just eight minutes into the film: out of revenge for grassing on him, Jaibo kills Julián, hitting him on the back of the head with a stone, and then pounding him to death with a stick. The audience is not prepared by visual or aural clues, and the murder is made all the more horrific because of Julián's dull scream. The action is filmed in a sequence of medium shots without graphic close-ups, in a typically Buñuelian manner: 'There are hardly any close-ups in my films. It's unnecessary to go beyond the medium shot' ['no…hay casi *closeup* en mis películas. No hace falta pasar del busto'] (quoted in Aub, 1985, p. 156). The sequence possesses symbolic resonance since it is framed by an establishing shot of urban decay (a dilapidated building) at the beginning and by the black cock at the end. By wrapping these two apparently unconnected images – one expressing violent urbanity, the other aggressive animality – around the film's central act of violence (since all the other crimes spring from it), Buñuel in effect shows that the human and the animal worlds are linked by their mutual predication on violence.

Other images of violence are similarly unadorned. When Carmelo, for example, is beaten up, the desire for vengeance is shown in all its nakedness. 'Go on, tough nut, let him have it!' ['¡Anda, Pelón, desquítate!'], as Jaibo says to his friend, Pelón (Jorge Pérez), throughout the scene. And the scene in which Pedro is murdered by Jaibo when attempting to hide in the barn where Meche's family lives, is stylistically raw; once more we see Jaibo hitting Pedro's head off-screen, and this time we see his blood-covered face. What is most disturbing about these scenes is that, as viewers, we are provoked into taking up the Sadean position of deriving pleasure from the visual experience of the suffering of others, those passions which, according to Saint-Fond, are 'the most delicious to experience within a man's heart' ['les plus délicieuses que puissent naître au coeur de l'homme'] (Sade, 1909, p. 101).[7] This is uncomfortable for the average viewer.

The last scene of violence I wish to focus on is the one in which Pedro attacks his peers in the reform school and subsequently, out of frustration, two hens. It is at this point that the viewer realises that the cycle of violence has passed from one generation to the next and, furthermore, that Pedro cannot escape Jaibo's evil influence. The pious words which feature in the opening voice-over are shown – ultimately – to be a nonsense. This scene brings together a number of different strands which had been weaving their way through the film. Thus Pedro re-enacts not only Jaibo's violence (remember that he stopped Jaibo, or tried to stop him, from killing Julián, early on in the film), but also, more importantly, his mother's, since he is mimicking her violence when she killed the black cockerel which had been fighting with the hens in the barn. An unusual feature of this scene occurs when the camera lens is suddenly brought into focus and then gets splattered by the egg yolk hurled angrily at it by Pedro. Marcel Oms describes this action in terms of aggression against bourgeois perceptions of reality.[8] It can also legitimately be seen as that juncture when the subaltern attempts to destroy the control that the camera eye exerts over the characters' lives, breaking down the system whereby art produces scopophilic pleasure, allowing, just for a moment, the violence of the subaltern to be expressed precisely because it fights against disclosure.

There is clearly, thus, a tension operating in *Los olvidados* whereby it mimicks the positivistic essentialism of the sociologist who exposes poverty on a superficial level, while simultaneously hinting that the consciousness of the subaltern will always remain hidden, even when it is being disclosed. The subaltern in *Los olvidados* deliberately absconds from that epistemic violence which, in one guise, is the omniscient and non-forgiving panopticon of the legal code and, in another, is the all-seeing eye of the camera. The film, thus, draws attention to the mechanics of its own production and, in particular, the means by which the subaltern is imaged and transmitted to a larger public. The subaltern at the conclusion of *Los olvidados* is shown to be actively involved in the process by which it remains unknown.

These three scenes are important, I suggest, because the central motif of the film is that the cardinal law of subaltern culture is that it is forbidden to be a 'grass' (*soplón*). Squealing on your neighbour is met with the most rigorous of punishments. Jaibo first of all kills Julián because he believes him to be a grass, and then he kills Pedro, his accomplice, for the same reason. Grassing is equivalent to breaking up that unity to which Jaibo alludes – just after murdering Julián, and pointing to the shared possession of the spoils of the kill – when he says to Pedro: 'so now we're more united than ever' ['así que estamos más unidos que nunca']. To break down that fraternity – the self-sufficiency of the subaltern classes – is to blow the whistle, and this transgression can only be met with death. Pedro has learned this lesson; again it is not by chance that the reason he attacks the boy in the *Correccional* is because the latter is a *soplón*.

This is, indeed, one of the delightful paradoxes of the film. While Buñuel is revealing the plight of the subaltern classes, he also allows their aggression at the thought of being disclosed – imaged variously as closing doors, keeping your neighbours out, killing people who grass – to rise to the surface in the film. Buñuel is thereby able to show both sides of the coin simultaneously. He displays the subaltern in that carefully constructed cage of publicity epitomised by the language of film but he also demonstrates, at crucial junctures in *Los olvidados*, how the forgotten react with hostility towards the camera's all-seeing eye. The forgotten actively collude with society's desire that they be for ever consigned to oblivion: the subaltern remains hidden inside the box.

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Notes

[1] Octavio Paz refers to Carmelo in the following terms: 'That blind beggar is already familar to us from the Spanish picaresque' (Ese mendigo ciego ya lo hemos visto en la picaresca española) (1994, p. 224).

[2] Henceforward translations from texts in languages other than English are mine.

[3] Though Paz was impressed by the film: 'I found the film moving: it was infused with the same violent imagination and the same implacable logic as *L'Âge d'or*, but Buñuel, in a very controlled way, had created an even more concentrated final product' ['La película me conmovió: estaba animada por la misma imaginación violenta y por la misma razón implacable de *La edad de oro*, pero Buñuel, a través de una forma muy estricta, había logrado una concentración mayor'] (1994, p. 230).

[4] Carmelo and the nameless amputee are also linked by the central image of sight; the latter has the unusual phrase, 'you were looking at me' ['me mirabas'], on his trolley; see a still in Agustín Sánchez Vidal (1988, pp. 311–12).

[5] Tiresias was the most renowned soothsayer of all antiquity, despite being blind from his seventh year; he carried a golden staff, which, in Carmelo's case, becomes a stick with a nail at the end.

[6] For further discussion of eye imagery in Buñuel's work, see Sandro, 1987, pp. 23–9.

[7] Octavio Paz has commented on how *Los olvidados* is redolent of 'a passage from Sade' (un pasaje de Sade), and even points to Sade as being one of Buñuel's most important literary sources (1994, pp. 226, 229). Peter Evans refers to Buñuel's 'Sade-dominated attraction' to the Gothic (1995, p. 80).

[8] Quoted in Evans 1995, p. 85. Evans also offers the following interpretation of this act:

> Like Oedipus he [Pedro] plucks out, albeit figuratively, his own eye, symbol of sexual as well as other types of knowledge, and hurls it at the viewer, a gesture of rage and defiance aimed equally at his mother – and through her, all mothers – and at the social, moral, and metaphysical order of which he is the helpless and (invoking Freud's explanation of eye symbolism in the essay on the uncanny), in various cases, the castrated victim.
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> --1995, p. 86