A Companion to Luis Buñuel

Edited by Rob Stone and Julián Daniel Gutiérrez-Albilla

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“A Companion to Luis Buñuel is an extraordinarily broad and detailed portrait of the iconic filmmaker, boasting contributions by some of the very best scholars in film studies.”

Paul Julian Smith, City University of New York

“This multifaceted volume has a knack for shaking up received ideas. Thoroughly rethinking Buñuel, it sets his films free to make their own transformative meanings.”

Chris Perriam, University of Manchester

“Drawing on the expertise of international scholars from different disciplines, A Companion to Luis Buñuel delivers challenging readings worthy of their enthralling subject. The scope and originality of these essays greatly enrich discussion of Buñuel’s films.”

Isabel Santaolalla, University of Roehampton

Few cinematic figures are more controversial – or misunderstood – than the Spanish-born Mexican filmmaker Luis Buñuel (1900–1983). Condemned by the Vatican, exiled by Spain’s Francoist dictatorship, winner of an American Academy award, celebrated by the French New Wave, this creator of cinematic Surrealism is widely hailed as one of the most original directors in the history of film. A Companion to Luis Buñuel presents an extensive collection of critical readings that examines myriad facets of Buñuel’s life, works, and cinematic themes.

Contributed to by many of the world’s most distinguished film experts and emerging young scholars on Buñuel and Surrealism, the multidisciplinary readings offer new approaches to his films that reflect and challenge recent developments in the humanities and contemporary film studies while remaining faithful to the paradoxical, ambivalent, and heterogeneous nature of Buñuel’s work. In-depth analysis of the contribution of Buñuel to Spanish, French, and Mexican cinema, utilizing a wide range of original textual, theoretical, and historical approaches, is offered on topics ranging from Buñuel’s fascination with firearms and insects to his portrayals of feminine sexuality, Surrealism, and violence. A Companion to Luis Buñuel offers bold new insights to help shape our understanding of the enigmatic genius of one of the giants of World cinema.
A Companion to Luis Buñuel
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Edited by

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Introduction

The “Criminal” Life of Luis Buñuel

Rob Stone and Julián Daniel Gutiérrez-Albilla

Don’t ask me my opinions about art, because I don’t have any.

(Buñuel, 1982: 82)

In The Self and Its Pleasures, Carolyn Dean demonstrates that, since 1860, the “criminal” subject has conventionally been used as evidence of deviance and pathological behavior in order to define and to punish forbidden acts (1992). From this perspective, as the above epigraph from Luis Buñuel suggests, criminality designates the limits of the symbolic order and escapes rational conceptualization and representation. Criminality becomes a metaphor for that which it is impossible to symbolize, for that which escapes “that social rationality, that logical order on which a social aggregate is based” (Kristeva, 1982: 65). Buñuel’s life and films therefore seem to encapsulate the implications of the term “criminality” due to their impossibility of being subjected to symbolization. However, if his work has been canonized and hence subjected to fixed symbolization by the numerous studies on his cinema, whether edited volumes or single-authored books in the Anglo-American academy and beyond, how can one engage critically with his oeuvre and yet avoid inserting his ambivalent, paradoxical and elusive films into pre-established critical models that perpetuate their subjection to symbolization? Even at the risk of “vandalizing” the canon, it is the purpose of this volume to revitalize and rejuvenate the study of the films of Buñuel by revising the crucial debates that have conditioned our understanding of his cinema and by offering a plethora of new approaches to his films that reflect and challenge the most relevant recent developments in the humanities in general and in film studies in particular. The chapters that follow thus focus on multiple, interdisciplinary perspectives on his cinema and yet remain faithful to the paradoxical, ambivalent, and heterogeneous nature of Buñuel’s work, thereby avoiding any possibility of reducing his
work to fixed critical interpretations. It is to this emphasis on the creative, even emancipatory, potential of the concept of paradox underpinning Buñuel’s life and films that this introduction now turns.

Condemned by the Vatican, exiled by Spain’s Francoist dictatorship, celebrated by the French New Wave and an American Academy Award, as well as a great many filmmakers, Buñuel (1900–1983) is one of the most important, unique, and controversial figures in the history of cinema; but for all his reputation, films, and writings, he remains something of a sly unknown. The apparent coldness and deathly precision which his detractors identify in his films has, perhaps, done little to attract the interest his films deserve in the current generation of film scholars, students, and informed general spectators, who dutifully respect but perhaps do not gleefully engage with his still provocative and controversial work. Buñuel’s great sense of humor is often over-analyzed to the extent that his satire falls flat, for instance. His punch lines are diluted by explanation, and the subversive power of great gags like the tableau vivant of beggars forming a parody of Leonardo da Vinci’s The Last Supper in his scabrous Viridiana (1961) is too often treated as if in a dusty museum case instead of in the spirit of lucid, irreverent response. A knowing nod instead of a hearty guffaw is not the way to be affected by or to truly understand the ambivalent nature of Buñuel’s work.

A Goya for the twentieth century, Buñuel remains something of an enigma that the plethora of academic and critical writing on his life and films has failed to undo entirely. The paradoxes begin with his love–hate relationship with Spain and continue with his exile, which complicates and confuses any notion of national cinema in relation to films that thrive on the volatile mix of sarcasm and sentiment that typifies his best work. A vociferous libertarian, his enduring marriage was characterized by jealousy and prudery. Buñuel was a thoroughbred chauvinist with a passion for embroidery, who despised what became of Spain during the Francoist dictatorship but recreated the most traditional of Iberian households while in exile in Mexico. The greatest Spanish filmmaker, he made only three films in Spain. He boasted of never having made a film that went against his singular vision, but his radicalism is often exaggerated and his outsider status is problematized by the fact that his most interesting work was produced under patronage, such as when claimed by France in the final years of his career. He was a beacon for political dissent, but he left the Communist Party quite early in his cinematic career (see Gubern and Hammond, 2012) and never once thereafter declared an orthodox affiliation to any particular political party. He made films about male desire and his female protagonists were often victims of it, but his films offered magnificent roles for actresses of the caliber of Silvia Pinal, Catherine Deneuve, and Jeanne Moreau. He satirized his own class but was a product of its privileges. He inveigled his spectators in the satire of authority, only to sucker them into identifying with this supposed enemy by reflecting his audience’s own obeisance to good manners and decorum, for, as Gilles Deleuze diagnosed, “in Buñuel, servility is a feature of master as well as servant [and] degradation is the symptom of this
universal impulse” (Deleuze, 2005a: 141). He studied Sigmund Freud and applied his teachings to the study of the bourgeois consciousness but also pitied the humanity even in his oppressors, such as General Franco, “kept alive artificially for months at the cost of incredible suffering” (Buñuel, 1982: 256).

To some scholars Buñuel is a bestia negra, for others a cause célèbre. Yet, in decamping to one side or another of this most polemical character, we may fail to realize that his films and persona undercut any possible essentialist definition of what constitutes one’s identity. The black humor, sinful eroticism, sight-gags and overwhelming nihilism of his films is all somewhat archetypically Spanish, having evolved through the centuries of Spanish literature and art that Buñuel devoured. Yet he was also a revolutionary who more than any other artist and filmmaker of the twentieth century seems to encapsulate and to have contributed to the pervasive artistic, political, and theoretical legacy of Surrealism. Consequently, many of the contributors to this volume rethink, both historically and textually, Buñuel’s relationship with Surrealism or rethink Surrealism’s relationship with Buñuel. In so doing, Surrealism is posited both as a historical avant-garde artistic movement as well as an aesthetic and political sensibility that impregnates subsequent cultural practices, including film, throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Hence, although a deep and wide engagement with Surrealism and its legacies is beyond the scope of this introduction, some basic ideas that underpinned this important artistic movement should be described here.

As is well known, the Surrealists were highly influenced by Freud’s interpretation of dreams and his emphasis on the unconscious. As a result, they were fascinated by dreams as a route to the unconscious and were concerned with achieving immediacy of expression through automatic writing (associated with a method that André Breton himself and Philippe Soupault used in their 1919 text, Les champs magnétiques [Magnetic Fields]) and drawing (associated, for instance, with the drawings produced by André Masson). For the Surrealists, such activities were embraced in order to “circumvent the conscious control of image-making” (Ades and Bradley, 2006: 11). By means of these and other, similar techniques, such as rapid associative thought and experiments with collage, moreover, film appeared as the pliant and receptive artistic media in which to translate in an immediate and uncensored manner the images and ideas of the unconscious that are otherwise repressed in our conscious mind. As Buñuel himself wrote, “a film is like an involuntary imitation of a dream. … The cinema seems to have been invented to express the life of the subconscious” (cited in Mellen, 1978: 105–110). Drawing on Hegelian dialectics, Marxism, the Freudian discovery of the unconscious, and modern literary texts inscribed in “another” logic, from Lautréamont to Mallarmé, to name just a few, the Surrealists considered art in general and film in particular as being ideally suited not only for the representation of dreams but also for replicating at the level of form their process of figuration by means of emphasizing the uncanny and illogical juxtaposition of distant, if not incompatible realities revealed in the field of representation. Thus they conceived of art as a poetic process that mobilized our
unexpected encounters with the marvelous in our conscious and unconscious life. Such a formal revolution transcended the sphere of art and went far beyond this historical avant-garde artistic movement. It extended to other social spheres, thus stimulating deep political changes that would subvert the hegemonic, modern bourgeois ideology in the context of a society whose moral values and faith in rational progress had collapsed after the traumatic impact of and destruction caused by the World War I. As a result, the Surrealists believed in the significance of the violent force of desire – a desire for an impossible object that provoked the shattering of one’s subjectivity, defined as *l’amour fou*. They also celebrated and explored the oneiric dimension of life and the intellectual and artistic creation free from positivist rationality, thereby attempting to liberate themselves from the burden of realist representation and from the aesthetic, moral, and political dictations of the dominant, modern bourgeois society at the psychic and social level. They did this through the use of horror, shock, comedy, the absurd, blasphemy, and violent and erotic imagery, to name just a few tools of Surrealism. As such, Buñuel’s cinema has to be understood vis-à-vis both the development and the dissolution of this avant-garde movement as well as the crucial impact of Surrealism upon subsequent literary, film, and artistic practices and on theoretical debates, such as postmodernism, contemporary queer theory, and gender studies, as well as upon the anarchic, experimental sensibility that would embrace “criminality,” dismiss “art,” and overturn all “isms.”

*A Companion to Luis Buñuel* thus addresses the relationship between historical analysis and contemporary artistic and theoretical reflection as a way of highlighting and encouraging us to think through the reverberations of Surrealism in Buñuel’s cinema across spaces and times and recent art and critical theory. Buñuel’s cinema seems to illustrate the theories from Surrealists who were crucial participants of this historical avant-garde movement. These include Breton, whose 1924 and 1929 manifestos establish the precepts of this artistic movement sketched above, and, more radically, the dissident Surrealist Georges Bataille, whose magazine, *Documents* (1929–1930), reflects the subversive energy and the violent confrontation of imagery and ideas associated with a heterodox Surrealism (see Ades and Baker, 2006) even as it refashions the aesthetic and ideological proposals of the earlier surrealist movement. In comparison, Buñuel’s genius was his objectivity, which recognized the suppression of desire in any bourgeois setting, particularly when this corresponded to the hegemony of Catholic societies. To view his films is to undo any possible way of thinking in terms of privileging one term over another within dichotomies. Resonating with Baroque art and literature, Buñuel’s life and cinema, as Carol Armstrong argues in a different context, “tend to keep self-dividing into opposite directions, which themselves never remain binary” (2012: 200). Awareness of this certainly allowed and accounts for the very different approaches undertaken by the contributors to this volume. As a result, we understand that all human life is chaos and the only point of structure in an otherwise hostile universe is this filmmaker’s particular awareness of the
conscious and unconscious forms of our existence that continuously confront the struggle between hatred and love, creation and destruction, pleasure and pain, or between desire (eros) and death (thanatos).

A close friend of the poet and playwright Federico García Lorca and one-time collaborator with the artist Salvador Dalí, Buñuel was an inveterate, self-taught filmmaker, who began by editing films with a magnifying glass on a kitchen table and was later feted by the likes of Alfred Hitchcock and Billy Wilder. However, like Ingmar Bergman, Michelangelo Antonioni, Robert Bresson, and Jean-Luc Godard, Buñuel is too often consigned to a time capsule that on opening requires a critical empathy that is beyond many contemporary spectators. He gave few interviews and despised the critical incarceration of his work, famously deriding in the preface to the published script of Un chien andalou, “this imbecilic crowd that has found beautiful or poetic that which, at heart, is nothing other than a desperate, impassioned call for murder” (Buñuel, 2000: 162), which sets an admittedly severe challenge for a volume such as this. Nevertheless, A Companion to Luis Buñuel is testament to the fact that challenges can inspire as well as inhibit. It begins with this introduction that incorporates biographical details intended to refresh experts and inform newcomers alike and which celebrates what can be identified as the Buñuelian thematic and stylistic motifs in his films; and yet the volume avoids reducing his fascinating cinema to what Peter William Evans identifies as a narrowly auteurist approach (1995: 2). The filmmaker’s biography may integrate and proceed with a discussion of the main themes that emerge in relation to the films but this does not exclude other possible thematics that underpin his often paradoxical and ambivalent work. Thus, although this introduction foregrounds some of the main themes that may elucidate Bunuel’s cinema, the aim is to try not to perpetuate Gwynne Edwards’s association of Buñuel’s cinema with the struggling and opposing forces in the director’s personality – Catholicism and Surrealism – as if these two opposing forces were exclusive in the constitution and formation of the personality or subjectivity of the filmmaker (Acevedo-Munoz, 2003: 3). As Julián Daniel Gutiérrez-Albilla explains in his study of Buñuel (2008), for Edwards Buñuel’s films seem to be direct products of the personal expression of the director’s creative imagination, whereas Sally Faulkner, citing Linda Williams’s psychoanalytic study of Luis Buñuel (1996), claims that this unproblematic critical method mystifies and mythifies the Buñuelian œuvre, thereby perpetuating a patriarchal epistemology which places the male, genius artist in total control of the meaning of his work. For Faulkner, these interpretations of Buñuel’s cinema are static and ahistorical: “further, the individualism on which this theory is predicated is somewhat at odds with the collective nature of the surrealist movement” (2004: 128).

Proceeding from this, although the chapters in this volume are arranged to some extent chronologically, the reader is advised that Buñuel’s cinema undercuts, paradoxically, any possible linear reading of his films. Instead, this structure aims for a productive tension that encourages the reader to find resonances across
chapters, for the focus of this volume is on the critical and theoretical implications of Buñuel’s cinema with regard to the study of each contributor. In other words, using Buñuel’s films as case studies, this volume concentrates on critical discourses and theoretical analyses, thereby exploring new ways of approaching the ambivalent and heterogeneous nature of Buñuel’s cinema and proposing new critical and theoretical interventions and interrogations of it. If, indeed, we critics and academicians, aficionados all, are to reveal ourselves as an “imbecilic crowd” for finding beauty and poetry in Buñuel’s impassioned calls to murder, it is entirely in the sense that, as Billy Wilder stated, “an audience is never wrong. An individual member of it may be an imbecile, but a thousand imbeciles together in the dark – that is critical genius” (2012: s.n.).

An Aragonese Dog

Luis Buñuel Portolés (Figure 0.1) was born on February 22, 1900 in Calanda, a town in the province of Teruel, in Aragón, Spain, famous for its annual celebration involving the delirious beating of drums (Figures 0.2, 0.3, and 0.4). He was an unruly prodigy and the eldest of seven children born to the well-to-do Leonardo Buñuel, who had made his fortune from plantations in Cuba, and María Portolés, who gave him two brothers and four sisters. When Luis was still an
infant, the family moved to Zaragoza, where the children received a typically disciplined Jesuit education at the private Colegio del Salvador. He was a virile and talented sportsman who inherited the family obsession with guns, but also a precocious scholar and a willful ruffian, whose delight at mischievous anarchy,
which would prove itself one of the most characteristic ingredients of his films, led to a beating by a study hall proctor. He subsequently left this Jesuit college, telling his parents he had been expelled, and completed his high school education in a local public school.

Nevertheless, aspects of his future career as a filmmaker may be usefully adjudged a prolonged reaction to the privilege and fear that governed education in Spanish society. This prompted his alliance with the first murmurings of atheist existentialism in a devoutly Catholic country. Already, then, he was the Buñuel who would delight in dressing up as a nun and riding trams in order to pinch the bottoms of scandalized ladies, the unruly scholar whose passion for insects inspired a similar appreciation of the workings of humans, whose second thoughts on the dominant Christianity and domineering Catholicism of Spain
revealed to him an alternative view of life that was both intensely personal and inevitably anarchic. Still, such restlessness would not find common cause or medium of expression until Buñuel left the provinces in 1917 to enroll in the University of Madrid to study agronomy and industrial engineering, later switching his degree to philosophy. There, in the boisterous kind of Oxbridge that was the Residencia de Estudiantes, a pedagogical experiment promoted by the philosopher Francisco Giner de los Ríos, he met Dalí and Lorca and engaged in an intense kinship that was complicated by Lorca’s homosexuality, Dalí’s asexuality, and Buñuel’s at times brutish machismo, but which also fostered gleeful student pranks, many of which revolved around a pretend Order of the medieval city of Toledo (Figure 0.5). Their friendship and creativity contributed to the tremendous ebullience in philosophy and the arts, in which Freud’s psychoanalytic focus on the structures of condensation and displacement in dreams and their relation to the unconscious and the aforementioned technique of free association (see Colman, 2003: 288) offered a viable alternative way of expression to the oppressive rationality of society; that was, the liberation of otherwise forbidden instinct in creative work and actions.

Yet, while Bunuel’s indebtedness to the writings of Freud is apparent, some of the most compelling interpretations of his cinema foreground Jacques Lacan’s rereading of Freud’s unconscious in terms of being structured like a language. For
instance, focusing on *Un chien andalou* (An Andalusian Dog, 1929), *L'Âge d’or* (The Golden Age, 1930), *Le Fantôme de la liberté* (The Phantom of Liberty, 1974), and *Cet obscour objet du désir* (That Obscure Object of Desire, 1977), Linda Williams foregrounds the *mise en scène* of desire in order to demonstrate that Buñuel’s films are analogous to dream structures and how they relate to the unconscious. For Williams, Buñuel’s films disrupt the spectator’s identification with the diegetic image, thus foregrounding the signifier. As such, Williams convincingly argues that the “Surrealists’ interest in film arose not from the power of motion photography to create the illusion of diegetic time and space, but from the power of the image to structure this time and space into radically different forms” (1981: 143).

Another Lacanian reader of Buñuel’s cinema is Paul Sandro, who has primarily concentrated on the way in which Buñuel “perverts classical narrative structures through their violations of the conventions of spectatorship and wish fulfilment” (cited in Acevedo-Muñoz, 2003: 2). For Sandro, Buñuel’s films disrupt cinematic representation by means of perturbing the specular position that they had initially determined for the spectator. Tracing a recurrent theme in most of Buñuel’s films, Sandro contends that Buñuel’s films establish a productive tension between the subject’s desire and teleological aims and the contingent intrusions which endlessly prevent the subject’s desires and projects from realizing itself or from achieving a certain form of closure. If this can be a central theme in Buñuel’s cinema, it is at the level of cinematic form (such as an emphasis on a lack of linear, cause–effect narrative structure), that both foregrounds the constructed nature of representation and reflects or illustrates our frustrating desires for interpretation (Sandro, 1988).

Yet, Buñuel’s cinema cannot be reduced to a Lacanian psychoanalytic emphasis on lack and castration and the privileging of the phallic signifier. If Deleuze has become a major influence in current film theory, it is worth underlining here the way in which Deleuze, together with Guattari, undid Lacanian psychoanalysis from within to rethink Bunuel’s cinema beyond Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic models. Deleuze and Guattari have attacked Lacanian psychoanalysis for remaining within the family framework. Although they do not totally break with the psychoanalytic paradigm (in fact Guattari was trained by Lacan and remained a member of Lacan’s École Freudienne de Paris and a practicing analyst even after the 1972 publication of *Capitalisme et schizophrénie 1: L’anti-Édipe*), Deleuze and Guattari propose a theory of desire that moves beyond the “privatized” individual psyche located within the Freudian Oedipal family. Their conception of desire is not contingent upon binary categories and exclusions, nor is it connected with lack, as in Lacan. Hence, we may rethink Buñuel’s cinema as a springboard for reflecting upon the subject’s liberation from his/her neurosis by privileging Deleuze’s and Guattari’s focus on the “schizos/flows” within, between and through partial subjects, thereby transforming the Freudian unconscious from a figurative or structural repository of repressed wishes into a revolutionary interaction of intensities. As a result, it would appear that Buñuel’s films challenge an