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CRUELTY AND LOVE IN LOS OLVIDADOS

by André Bazin

The case of Luis Buñuel is one of the strangest in the history of the cinema. Between 1928 and 1936, Buñuel only made three films, and of these only one — *L'Age d'Or* — was full length; but these three thousand metres of film are in their entirety archive classics, certainly, with *Le Sang d'un Poète*, the least dated productions of the avant-garde and in any case the only cinematic production of major quality inspired by surrealism. With *Las Hurdes*, a 'documentary' on the poverty-stricken population of the Las Hurdes region, Buñuel did not reject *Un Chien Andalou*; on the contrary, the objectivity, the soberness of the documentary surpassed the horror and the forcefulness of the fantasy. In the former, the donkey devoured by bees attained the nobility of a barbaric and Mediterranean myth which is certainly equal to the glamour of the dead donkey on the piano. Thus Buñuel stands out as one of the great names of the cinema at the end of the silent screen and the beginning of sound — one with which only that of Vigo bears comparison — in spite of the sparseness of his output. But after eighteen years Buñuel seemed to have definitely disappeared from the cinema. Death had not claimed him as it had Vigo. We only knew vaguely that he had been swallowed up by the commercial cinema of the New World, where in order to earn his living he was doing obscure and second-rate work in Mexico.

And now suddenly we get a film from down there signed Buñuel. Only a B feature, admittedly. A production shot in one month for eighteen million (old francs). But at any rate one in which Buñuel had freedom in the script and direction. And the miracle took place: eighteen years later and 5,000 kilometres away, it is still the same, the inimitable Buñuel, a message which remains faithful to *L'Age d'Or* and *Las Hurdes*, a film which lashes the mind like a red hot iron and leaves one's conscience no opportunity for rest.

The theme is outwardly the same as that which has served as a model for films dealing with delinquent youth ever since *The*

Road to Life, the archetype of the genre: the evil effects of poverty and the possibility of re-education through love, trust and work. It is important to note the fundamental optimism of this concept. A moral optimism first of all, which follows Rousseau in presupposing the original goodness of man, a paradise of childhood destroyed before its time by the perverted society of adults; but also a social optimism, since it assumes that society can redress the wrong it has done by making the re-education centre a social microcosm founded on the trust, order and fraternity of which the delinquent had been unduly deprived, and that this situation is sufficient to return the adolescent to his original innocence. In other words, this form of pedagogy implies not so much a re-education as an exorcism and a conversion. Its psychological truth, proved by experience, is not its supreme instance. The immutability of scenarios on delinquent youth from *The Road to Life* to *L'Ecole Buissonnière* (the character of the truant) passing via *Le Carrefour des Enfants Perdus*, prove that we are faced with a moral myth, a sort of social parable whose message is intangible.

Now the prime originality of *Los Olvidados* lies in daring to distort the myth. Pedro, a difficult inmate of a re-education centre in the shape of a model farm, is subjected to a show of trust — bringing back the change from a packet of cigarettes — as was Mustapha in *The Road to Life* — buying the sausage. But Pedro does not return to the open cage, not because he prefers to steal the money but because it is stolen from him by Jaibo, the evil friend. Thus the myth is not denied in essence — it cannot be; if Pedro had betrayed the director's trust, the latter would still have been right to tempt him by goodness. It is objectively much more serious that the experiment is made to fail from the outside and against Pedro's will, since in this way society is saddled with a double responsibility, that of having perverted Pedro and that of having compromised his salvation. It is all very well to build model farms where justice, work and fraternity reign, but so long as the same society of injustice and pain remains outside, the evil — namely the objective cruelty of the world — remains.

In fact my references to the films on fallen youth only throw light on the most outward aspect of Buñuel's film, whose fundamental premise is quite different. There is no contradiction between the explicit theme and the deeper themes which I now propose to

extract from it; but the first has only the same importance as the subject for a painter; through its conventions (which he only adopts in order to destroy them) the artist aims much higher, at a truth which transcends morality and sociology, at a metaphysical reality — the cruelty of the human condition.

The greatness of this film can be grasped immediately when one has sensed that it never refers to moral categories. There is no manicheism in the characters, their guilt is purely fortuitous — the temporary conjunction of different destinies which meet in them like crossed swords. Undoubtedly, adopting the level of psychology and morality, one could say of Pedro that he is 'basically good', that he has a fundamental purity: he is the only one who passes through this hail of mud without it sticking to him and penetrating him. But Jaibo, the villain, though he is vicious and sadistic, cruel and treacherous, does not inspire repugnance but only a kind of horror which is by no means incompatible with love. One is reminded of the heroes of Genêt, with the difference that in the author of the *Miracle de la Rose* there is an inversion of values which is not found at all here. These children are beautiful not because they do good or evil, but because they are children even in crime and even in death. Pedro is the brother in childhood of Jaibo, who betrays him and beats him to death, but they are equal in death, such as their childhood makes them in themselves. Their dreams are the measure of their fate. Buñuel achieves the *tour de force* of recreating two dreams in the worst tradition of Hollywood Freudian surrealism and yet leaving us palpitating with horror and pity. Pedro has run away from home because his mother refused to give him a scrap of meat which he wanted. He dreams that his mother gets up in the night to offer him a cut of raw and bleeding meat, which Jaibo, hidden under the bed, grabs as she passes. We shall never forget that piece of meat, quivering like a dead octopus as the mother offers it with a Madonna-like smile. Nor shall we ever forget the poor, homeless, mangy dog which passes through Jaibo's receding consciousness as he lies dying on a piece of waste ground, his forehead wreathed in blood. I am almost inclined to think that Buñuel has given us the only contemporary aesthetic proof of Freudianism. Surrealism used it in too conscious a fashion for one to be surprised at finding in its painting symbols which it put there in the first place. Only *Un Chien Andalou*, *L'Age d'Or* and *Los Olvidados* present

us with the psychoanalytical situations in their profound and irrefragable truth. Whatever the concrete form which Buñuel gives to the dream (and here it is at its most questionable), his images have a pulsating, burning power to move us — the thick blood of the unconscious circulates in them and swamps us, as from an opened artery, with the pulse the mind.

No more than on the children does Buñuel make a value judgment on his adult characters. If they are generally more evil-intentioned, it is because they are more irremediably crystallised, petrified by misfortune. The most horrifying feature of the film is undoubtedly the fact that it dares to show cripples without attracting any sympathy for them. The blind beggar who is stoned by the children gets his revenge in the end by denouncing Jaibo to the police. A cripple who refuses to give them some cigarettes is robbed and left on the pavement a hundred yards away from his cart — but is he any better than his tormentors? In this world where all is poverty, where everyone fights with whatever weapon he can find, no one is basically 'worse off than oneself'. Even more than being beyond good and evil, one is beyond happiness and pity. The moral sense which certain characters seem to display is basically no more than a form of their fate, a taste for purity and integrity which others do not have. It does not occur to these privileged characters to reproach the others for their 'wickedness'; at the most they struggle to defend themselves from it. These beings have no other points of reference than life — this life which we think we have domesticated by means of morality and social order, but which the social disorder of poverty restores to its original virtuality as a sort of infernal earthly paradise with its exit barred by a fiery sword.

It is absurd to accuse Buñuel of having a perverted taste for cruelty. It is true that he seems to choose situations for their maximum horror-content. What could be more atrocious than a child throwing stones at a blind man, if not a blind man taking revenge on a child? Pedro's body, when he has been killed by Jaibo, is thrown onto a rubbish dump amongst the dead cats and empty tins, and those who get rid of him in this way — a young girl and her grandfather — are precisely amongst the few people who wished him well. But the cruelty is not Buñuel's; he restricts himself to revealing it in the world. If he chooses the most frightful examples, it is because the real problem is not knowing that happiness exists

also, but knowing how far the human condition can go in misfortune; it is plumbing the cruelty of creation. This intention was already visible in the documentary on *Las Hurdes*. It hardly mattered whether this miserable tribe was really representative of the poverty of the Spanish peasant or not — no doubt it was — the important thing was that it represented human poverty. Thus, between Paris and Madrid it was possible to reach the limits of human degradation. Not in Tibet, in Alaska or in South Africa, but somewhere in the Pyrenees, men like you and me, heirs of the same civilisation, of the same race, had turned into these cretins keeping pigs and eating green cherries, too besotted to brush the flies away from their face. It did not matter that this was an exception, only that it was possible. Buñuel's surrealism is no more than a desire to reach the bases of reality; what does it matter if we lose our breath there like a diver weighed down with lead, who panics when he cannot feel the sand under his heel. The fantasy of *Un Chien Andalou* is a descent into the human soul, just as *Las Hurdes* and *Los Olvidados* are explorations of man in society.

But Buñuel's 'cruelty' is entirely objective, it is no more than lucidity, and anything but pessimism; if pity is excluded from his aesthetic system, it is because it envelops it everywhere. At least this is true of *Los Olvidados*, for in this respect I seem to detect a development since *Las Hurdes*. The documentary on *Las Hurdes* was tinged with a certain cynicism, a self-satisfaction in its objectivity; the rejection of pity took on the colour of an aesthetic provocation. *Los Olvidados*, on the contrary, is a film of love and one which demands love. Nothing is more opposed to 'existentialist' pessimism than Buñuel's cruelty. Because it evades nothing, concedes nothing, and dares to dissect reality with surgical obscenity, it can rediscover man in all his greatness and force us, by a sort of Pascalian dialectic, into love and admiration. Paradoxically, the main feeling which emanates from *Las Hurdes* and *Los Olvidados* is one of the unshakeable dignity of mankind. In *Las Hurdes*, a mother sits unmoving, holding the dead body of her child on her knees, but this peasant face, brutalised by poverty and pain, has all the beauty of a Spanish Pieta: it is disconcerting in its nobility and harmony. Similarly, in *Los Olvidados*, the most hideous faces are still in the image of man. This presence of beauty in the midst of atrocity (and which is by no means only the beauty of atrocity),

this perennality of human nobility in degradation, turns cruelty dialectically into an act of charity and love. And that is why *Los Olvidados* inspires neither sadistic satisfaction nor pharisaic indignation in its audiences.

If we have made passing reference to surrealism, of which Buñuel is historically one of the few valid representatives, it is because it was impossible to avoid this reference. But to conclude, we must underline the fact that it is insufficient. Over and beyond the accidental influences (which have no doubt been fortunate and enriching ones), in Buñuel surrealism is combined with a whole Spanish tradition. The taste for the horrible, the sense of cruelty, the seeking out of the extreme aspects of life, these are also the heritage of Goya, Zurbaran and Ribera, of a whole tragic sense of humanity which these painters have displayed precisely in expressing the most extreme human degradation — that of war sickness, poverty and its rotten accessories. But their cruelty too was no more than the measure of their trust in mankind and in painting.

CREDITS :

Scenario by	Luis Buñuel, Luis Alcoriza and Oscar Dancigers
Directed by	Luis Buñuel
Produced by	Oscar Dancigers
Production company	Ultramar Films, SA
Director of photography	Gabriel Figueroa
Assistant director	Ignacio Villarreal
Art director	Edward Fitzgerald
Production team	Federico Amerigo, Antonio de Salazar, Fidel Pizarro
Edited by	Carlos Savage
Assistant editor	Alberto E. Valenzuela
Sound engineers	Jesus Gonzalez G., Jose B. Carles
Music composed by	Gustavo Pitaluga
Music arranged by	Rodolfo Halffter
Process director	W. W. Claridge
Studio	Tepeyac Studios
Process	Black and white
Running time	89 minutes
Made during	1950

Los Olvidados was awarded the Grand Prix for Direction and the International Critics' Prize at the Cannes Film Festival, 1951

CAST :

Marta, Pedro's mother	Estela Inda
Don Carmelo	Miguel Inclan
the blind man	
Pedro	Alfonso Mejia
Jaibo	Roberto Cobo
Meche	Alma Delia Fuentes
Farm school director	Francisco Jambrina
Big-eyes	Mario Ramirez
Poxy	Efrain Arauz
Julian	Javier Amezcua
with :	
Jesus Garcia Navarro, Sergio Villarreal, Jorge Perez	