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Slashing the Complacent Eye:
Luis Buñuel and the Cinema of the Surrealist Documentary

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Senior Honors Thesis

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“To my mind there exist two different kinds of documental films: one which can be called descriptive in which the material is limited to the transcription of a natural or social phenomenon...Another type, much less frequent, is one which, while both descriptive and objective, tries to interpret reality...Such a documental film is much more complete, because, besides illustrating, it is moving...Thus besides the descriptive documental film, there is the psychological one. I should like the making of documental films of a psychological nature”

(Bunuel 127)

“Surrealism is above all a movement of revolt. It is not the result of intellectual caprice, but rather of a tragic conflict between the powers of the spirit and the conditions of life”

(Carrouges 1)

By ceasing to perceive experiential reality and surrealist vision as contradictions, Spanish surrealist filmmaker Luis Buñuel created *Tierra Sin Pan (Land Without Bread)* (aka *Las Hurdes*) (1933), one of the most striking critiques of Western values and their manifestation in early ethnographic film. Some of the earliest cinematic portraits of the exotic, such as *Nanook of the North (1922)*, *Chang (1927)*, and *Congorilla (1929)*, portrayed native populations through dramatic, Eurocentric narratives by filmmakers without any anthropological training. These early portraits of the Other were the beginnings of the ethnographic tradition. Most of these early films, however, were made to appeal to the Western bourgeois mass audience and were highly manipulative of their content.

Simultaneously with the development of early ethnographic film, the artistic and publicly political surrealist movement in Paris, led by André Breton, sought to liberate the minds of the Western bourgeoisie. Leftist politics of subversion—anti-war, anti-materialism, anti-tradition, anti-convention, anti-art, and anti-complacency—were promoted in surrealist publications, public acts of destruction, and especially art. Buñuel was the greatest known surrealist filmmaker, and *Land Without Bread* was only his third film following his quintessentially surrealist pieces *Un Chien andalou (1928)* and *L'Age d'or (1930)*. Applying surrealist aesthetics of subversion to the early ethnographic techniques of his time, Buñuel produced a new genre of film: the surrealist documentary.

Appearing infrequently in the critical literature on documentary and surrealist filmmaking and on Buñuel in particular, this term, “surrealist documentary,” was used first by scholar Virginia Higginbotham in her 1979 book *Luis Buñuel*, and more recently in 2002 by Mercè Ibarz in “A Serious Experiment: *Land Without Bread*, 1933.”

The term is defined by Ibarz in this way: “a multi-layered and unnerving use of sound, the juxtaposition of narrative forms already learnt from the written press, travelogues and new pedagogic methods, as well as through a subversive use of photographed and filmed documents understood as a basis for contemporary propaganda for the masses” (28). In other words, Buñuel has used surrealist aesthetics and leftist politics in a documentary format, creating a strange and unsettling record. This new genre was shocking and matter-of-fact, surrealist and scientific. By combining these two contradictory forms the surrealist documentary produces an unsettling view of experiential reality.

English language criticism on Buñuel has focused heavily on *Land Without Bread* as a documentary; very little has been written about the film’s connection to the Surrealist movement, or to early ethnographic filmmaking. The most recent monograph on Buñuel, Peter William Evans’ *The Films of Luis Buñuel—Subjectivity and Desire* (1995) does not even mention the film, except in passing, and even the most recent critical anthology, *Luis Buñuel—New Readings* (2004) edited by Evans and Isabel Santaollala gives the film no more than twelve pages in total, comprised largely of background material on the film and simplistic analysis. Although this term surrealist documentary has appeared in a small number of critical writings on Buñuel, it is not sufficiently developed for his classic revolutionary achievement *Land Without Bread*. Even Higginbotham, as groundbreaking as her work may be, does not explore *Land Without Bread* at length. Nothing to my knowledge, has investigated in depth the connections between surrealist and documentary traditions, especially ethnographic documentaries, or has explored the ways in which these seemingly contradictory approaches come *together* to create the surrealist documentary. It is in this vein I wish to carry on, in more depth, a critical analysis of

Buñuel's *Land Without Bread*, within its cultural, historical and artistic contexts in order to explore more fully the ways in which *Land Without Bread* is a surrealist documentary.

A decade before Buñuel made *Land Without Bread*, documentary filmmakers began turning to exotic peoples and places for subject matter. These early ethnographic films were all of a similar nature: preoccupied with documenting the exotic. Robert Flaherty's groundbreaking *Nanook of the North* gave birth to ethnographic film, and was meant to salvage the beauty and strength of the traditional Inuit way of life. While Flaherty was not trained as an anthropologist, nor was he creating the film for anthropologists, he had befriended the Inuit and lived among them for many years, having developed an anthropologically sensitive relationship with them. Flaherty's work was unique among these early ethnographic films, because of the filmmaker's inherently anthropological sensitivity and his long standing friendship with his subjects. He wrote of his filmmaking concerns:

I am not going to make films about what the white man has made of primitive peoples...What I want to show is the former majesty and character of these people, while it is still possible—before the white man has destroyed not only their character, but the people as well.

The urge that I had to make *Nanook* came from the way I felt about these people, my admiration for them; I wanted to tell others about them (qtd in Barnouw 45).

Indeed Flaherty strove to create a sense of one-ness with the Other and dispel the notion of their exoticism. Focus on the daily lives of Nanook and his family was meant to show the similarities across humanity, and it did indeed win hearts all over the world.

While there is much to champion about Flaherty's groundbreaking work, there were also significant problems involved in its production. The accuracy of the portrayal is debatable; for instance, the costuming of the Inuit is not completely true to the clothing they chose to wear off-camera. Flaherty wished to reinstate the traditional outfits of the Inuit, even though at the time of the filming, these traditions were obsolete. In addition, the family represented in the documentary was assembled by Flaherty, and specific details about the nature of the hunting and the trading of furs were not accurate representations of the actual Arctic situation. Dean Duncan summarizes a reaction film critics now have to the film, accusing "Flaherty of ignoring contemporary realities and real crises (cultural integration, unemployment, various modern social ills), in favor of romances that were, for all their prettiness and partial anthropological interest, socially irrelevant" (942). At the time of the film's release however, criticism on ethnographic and documentary film was full of shallow accolades, devoid of any truly critical or sophisticated analysis. As late as 1979 Robert Sherwood writes, "The production of this remarkable picture was no light task. Mr. Flaherty had to spend years with the Eskimos so that he could learn to understand them. Otherwise, he could not have made a faithful reflection of their emotions, their philosophy, and their endless privations" (16). It is important to consider however that the bulk of Flaherty's tampering with the truth was in the interest of capturing the admirable ways of tradition, and that the representations closely resembled a not-so-distant reality for the Inuit.

Because of *Nanook's* triumphant success with the general public, Flaherty was commissioned to make more films of a similar nature in different parts of the world. He followed *Nanook* with *Moana* (1926) in Samoa in the South Pacific, and later *Man of*

Aran (1935) in Ireland; however he was unable to replicate *Nanook's* critical and financial success. One reason for the success of his first film was his long-standing relationship with the people represented and his understanding and personal connection to them and their land over many years. However, now he was being commissioned to create another loving portrait of the Other from a different culture, and do so without any prior relationship with them. The conditions of production and the expectations were now changed; this was no longer a film Flaherty felt personally compelled to create at any cost, but it was instead a job with a deadline. Indeed, for Flaherty and audiences alike, *Moana* and *Man of Aran* held much less magic and less appeal.

The commercial success of *Nanook* can be seen, in retrospect, as part of the problem with the way in which early ethnographic film developed. Other studios and filmmakers, who had no experience at all producing any kind of documentary, especially one on a foreign culture, sought to capitalize on the success of Flaherty's "noble savage" theme. The foundation of respect and kinship with the subjects was lost on these commercial filmmakers. The exotic was the new fad; and productions of films like *Nanook* were eagerly created. These films hoped to entertain rather than humanize. Most notably, *Chang* and *Congorilla* were popular ethnographic films exploring foreign lands and the ways American people chose to represent them. In *Chang*, the future creators of the original *King Kong* (1933), Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, created a theatrical, Hollywood dramatization using native people and their land. Cooper and Schoedsack did not intend to document the lives of the people as they presented themselves. Instead they sought to entertain Western audiences with flamboyant representations of Eurocentric stereotypes; all action was staged and all dialogues were

contrived. Dialogue from the film includes, “The very last grain of rice is husked, O very small daughter!”; “Out, swords! Out spears! Out, O Brave Men! Help us, O Lord Buddha!” Cooper and Schoedsack even went so far as to anthropomorphize the animals, assigning them dialogue which was out of place and distracting.

Congorilla, which was shot by the married couple Osa and Martin Johnson, is one of the first sound pictures in a series of ethnographic films created by the Johnsons in Africa. These films were particularly racist and blatantly exploitative of the Other. Such descriptions by the filmmakers of the film as being about “big apes and little people,” and being “the first sound film from darkest Africa,” point to insensitive representations as an acceptable form of entertainment (qtd in Barnouw 50). Within the film itself, the Johnsons exploited the culture and its environment for commercial entertainment without any basis in fact, respect, or friendship. Osa terms one of their “black boy” helpers “Coffee Pot,” because she could not understand the real name he was saying. The “happiest little savages on earth” was the description given to the natives by the filmmakers, and Martin and Osa found humor in his remark that the visual image of a crocodile opening its mouth made him think: “Gee, what a place to throw old razor blades.” The film’s plot centered on the Johnsons’ provocation of activity, which was often harmful or simply degrading to the native population and its environment (qtd in Barnouw 50-51). This style of narration was certainly a dehumanizing way of representing the Other of which the sensitive and respectful Flaherty had never conceived. These approaches to the Other were typical of what reached the mass audience and probably Buñuel.

Concurrent with the development of the first ethnographic films in the 1920's was the Surrealist movement. Headed by the charismatic André Breton, and meeting at Breton's studio and the Café Certa, the surrealist group devised their name in October 1924 although the movement had existed earlier in the writings of several surrealist members. In their first publication, *La Révolution surréaliste* (1924), Louis Aragon wrote that a surrealist revolution called for a "new declaration of the rights of man" (qtd in Gale 215). Surrealism was meant to bring the irrational to everyday life in order to liberate humanity from the confines of logic, a force which had resulted in atrocities like rampant materialism and warfare. Recent theories of Sigmund Freud on the unconscious and the importance of dreams provided the surrealists with a foundation on which to build. Dreams, they learned from Freud, were the key to our unconscious desires, and thus to the surrealists, the antidote to the atrocities of conformism.

Surrealists were particularly interested in the dream state because they believed that it was within the unconscious mind of the dreamer where the rationality of bourgeois morality was forgotten. If the waking mind reasoned such atrocities as warfare, colonialism, religious tyranny, and insensitive complacency, then it was surely the unconscious which held the keys to freeing minds from such horrid confinements. The human mind, preoccupied with experiential reality and the logic taught and reinforced by society, is ignorant of fundamental truths of human nature, and persuaded to believe instead that oppressions such as war and religion are constructive and morally sound. Surrealists refused to believe such claims and recognized the powers of sexuality, death, and the unconscious as universal human traits. More importantly, they believed that by paying attention to dreams and the unconscious in the waking world, the reason and logic

which created the horrors of modern life would be obliterated. Indeed surrealism was a concept that could be used to shake the fragile balance of bourgeois life and values.

The Surrealist group did not contain their philosophies quietly within their circle of members; the purpose of surrealism was to revolutionize society at large through highly visible and radical acts. The philosophies of the group were most potently disseminated by Breton in his *First Manifesto of Surrealism* and *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* in which Breton defined surrealism in this way: “the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality” (14).

Art was one of the best venues for expressing the Surrealist philosophy, but Surrealism recognized the *cinema* as innately surreal in nature and thus the surrealist art *par excellence*. Film had a unique ability to convey ideas and emotions instantaneously, and the experience of film spectatorship was rather like bringing the dream state into the waking world. Surrealist cinema defied the reign of logic and reflected the absurdity of chance, the magnificence of the illogical, and the extremities of sexuality and violence that lay within the unconscious. Surrealist filmmakers used their art to expose the irrational, the illogical, and the instinctual both by replicating dreams and dream-like states and by tapping into black humor in their art. Black humor was manifested in their films through an emphasis on disturbing themes and images, juxtaposed with images and themes of a comical nature: black humor became one of the greatest tools of the surrealist cinema.

Black humor recognized the surreal entertainment of the ridiculous and the pitiful existing at once. Film critic Michel Carrouges describes black humor,

[as] an insulting laugh that comes from the depths of the being in revolt to provoke and defy public opinion and the cosmic fates...This is also the case...for Baudelaire, with his 'need to disconcert, to revolt, to stupefy' and whose 'last words, interrupting a silence of several months, were to ask, as though nothing were the matter, that one pass him the mustard' (89).

By shocking, disturbing, and strangely entertaining typical bourgeois viewers, the surrealist was exposing them to their greatest fear: that which was repressed.

The surrealists, who mocked conventionality, felt that cinema, being still in its newer stages, was not yet tainted by tradition, the enemy of art. According to film critic Robert Short:

the modernity of the movies was very much part of their appeal to the surrealists. Film was a new form as yet unencumbered with the baggage of an artistic tradition. It had not been 'putrefied' under layers of tradition and aesthetic pretension. It was a medium in its infancy, in an untamed state. For Aragon, cinema announced 'a new, audacious aesthetic, a sense of modern beauty' (9).

Cinema was a form of expression that attracted the general public, a perfect vehicle for the surrealists to stir up some revolution. Although there were a significantly small number of surrealist films made in comparison with the number of surrealist creations in other mediums, film became an important forum for political revolt.

Surrealist films manipulate experiential reality through such techniques as superimpositions, a preponderance of point of view shots, out-of-focus shots, filters to

distort the image, and anti-continuity editing. In using such techniques, surrealist filmmakers were able to take a world the viewer recognized and subvert it most disturbingly. Short explains:

from the inception of the movement in the early twenties, cinema was hailed as the elective surrealist means of expression on account of its power to disturb by betraying the expectations of the 'everyday eye' and its power to inspire by imposing original visions. In the 1950's, Breton wrote that the cinema had been marked out above all other media to promote '*la vraie vie [the true life]*'" (7).

Surrealist cinema transformed conventional reality by representing the contents of the unconscious visually and through a style which created ambiguity.

Luis Buñuel, a Spanish member of the Paris Surrealist group, became one of the most important surrealist filmmakers, and indeed one of the most important filmmakers of the twentieth century. His surrealist morals, politics, and perspectives shaped his work throughout his lifetime. Both in content and in style, Buñuel revolted against the notion of high art, which he considered a product of the conformist and complacent bourgeoisie. He wanted to shock, disturb, confuse, and frustrate the viewer as he mocked Western complacency and materialism with Surrealism's black humor. His deliberate rejection of artful style in the camera work, editing, and often in the musical score, made his films purposefully blunt and rather disjointed, much like a dream. He also avoided affiliation with large studios in every aspect of his filmmaking as a means of remaining faithful to his surrealist vision of total liberation, and also in an effort to retain control over his final

film products. He subverted the conventions of film in form and function; he rejected artiness and clear narrative plots, and he shocked and confronted the audience with disturbing images, and social criticism. Buñuel has referred to the surrealist perspective in his autobiography, and it is in this vein that he created his early surrealist films:

Their principal weapon wasn't guns, of course; it was scandal. Scandal was a potent agent of revelation, capable of exposing such social crimes as the exploitation of one man by another, colonialist imperialism, religious tyranny—in sum, all the secret and odious underpinnings of a system that had to be destroyed. The real purpose of surrealism was not to create a new literary, artistic, or even philosophical movement, but to explode the social order, to transform life itself (107).

Buñuel's *Un Chien andalou*, his first and most quintessentially surrealist of all his films, remains the most widely respected cinematic achievement of the surrealists. The content comprises Buñuel's and Salvador Dali's record of their dreams, and it makes use of sexuality, mutilation, religious mockery and grotesque images of dead animals. The most famous of all its scenes is the opening one in which a razor blade wielded by Buñuel himself slices open, in great close-up detail, what appears to be a woman's eyeball (but is actually a sheep's eye). This was the perfect surrealist statement and the perfect use of the cinematic medium for promoting surrealist philosophies; the complacent bourgeois viewers were not expecting such grotesque violence, nor would they be spared the recognition that their perspective is going to be changed. Robert Short sums up the importance of this image quite nicely:

The surrealists always thought of the cinema as a threat to the eye, and more radically, to the two eyes of the spectator: one eye being the organ of sight, and the second 'I,' the viewer's personal identity. But it soon became clear that the mutilation of the eye in *Un Chien andalou* is meant to be read as the prelude to revelation, not as a terminal blinding (6).

Although the surrealists recognized cinema as the most surreal of the art forms, very few members of the group actually created films. Buñuel was certainly the most prolific and well known of the surrealist filmmakers; his oeuvre included thirty-two films with memorable titles such as *Belle de Jour* (1967), *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972), and *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977); no other surrealist who dabbled in film could come close. Buñuel's films, the basis of the surrealist film canon, are classically impenetrable and difficult to interpret. In accordance with a rejection of the reign of logic, these films use bizarre details and plots. Indeed, the content and style of the films is often seemingly random and purposely confusing, as are Buñuel's comments about them. In his autobiography he wrote that much of the context of his films was created by deciding arbitrarily what provoked the right emotion within him. Buñuel's use of bizarre combinations of shots and his use of chance when filming were important elements of his surrealist vision. Buñuel's films were often elusive and ambiguous. His comments about his work followed the same pattern. However, it is clear that his Surrealist vision became a dominant shaping force for his cinematic works. One of the greatest of these works being his surrealist documentary *Land Without Bread*.

Land Without Bread is created to appear like other ethnographic films of the era, thus concealing its distrust of the genre. The voice-over narration is dry, detached, and largely factual describing the images depicted visually. The information is generally of a factual nature; however the piece in its entirety is accompanied by the non-diegetic soundtrack of Brahms' Fourth Symphony. The scene opens with a sequence capturing the behaviors of the male newlyweds of the village of Alberqua which results in a drunken feast. This is precluded by the famous sequence of the beheading of roosters. After Buñuel indicates that the villagers had become inebriated, the camera crew move on to the next village, Ba Secaro, in which the only surviving Carmelite monk lives in the traditionally picturesque seclusion of an old monastery with great works of art, and fertile soil inhabiting many lovely species of flora. Once out of Ba Secaro, the film crew moves onto their most important destination: Las Hurdes. Within the title village, Buñuel and crew film a record, much like other ethnographic films of the time, showing the Hurdanos' obtaining and preparation of food, their planting methods, technology, the status of their water supply, burial methods, religion, education, family and domestic life, health, architecture, and customs. The film shows explicitly much of the suffering that the villagers and their animals endure throughout the year due to a variety of circumstances.

Despite how essential the soundtrack appears to viewers today, the first version of *Land Without Bread* was silent. It was accompanied by Brahms' Fourth Symphony performed live with voice-over narration read by Buñuel himself in Spanish. This took place as a private screening for the city's intellectuals in 1933 at the Palace of the Press in Madrid. The audience was angered by the film's stark insensitivity and the film was

banned by the Republican government of the time and its politically conservative successor led by General Franco. However the film was released thereafter for the first time with synchronized sound in 1934 and at least two English language versions were created; there is no definitive history of which I am aware of the transformation of this film from its original version. One of these variations was released in Paris in 1937; another was released in the United States by the Museum of Modern Art in New York sometime between 1939 and the early 1940's. Buñuel presumably contributed to the details of translation from the Spanish and the editing of sound and image in the MOMA print because he worked at the museum during this time, translating Spanish films. It is this American print that most scholars use; I will also be using this MOMA print for my analysis from this point on, unless specifically stated otherwise.

There are few of the classic surrealist camera and editing techniques employed in *Land Without Bread*; missing are the distorted camera angles, filters, anti-continuity editing, out-of-focus shots, and the preponderance of point-of-view shots. However, the political and moral agenda of surrealism is part of the film in three important ways: first, in the film's use of the surrealist tool of black humor; second, in the film's critique of the complacency of the western bourgeoisie; and third, in the film's interrogation of ethnographic filmmaking traditions which presume that logic and rationality will lead to a truthful portrait. Through these three surrealist strategies in combination with the ethnographic film format, Buñuel created an activist interpretation of experiential reality: the surrealist documentary.

By juxtaposing the visual and the oral, through image, narration, and musical score, *Land Without Bread* creates a darkly comic interpretation of the misery of the Hurdanos.

However, Buñuel is a surrealist, and it would be counterintuitive to take this insensitive interpretation at face value. Buñuel said of *Land Without Bread*: “I made *Las Hurdes* because I had a surrealist vision and because I was interested in the problem of man. I saw reality in a different way than I would have seen it before surrealism” (qtd in Higginbotham 53). Thinking critically about the film, considering its surrealist awareness, it is essential to contextualize the film within the filmmaker’s surrealist politics. Within surrealist contexts the dark humor of absurdity highlights effectively the illogic of reality and the atrocities logic defends. Therefore by using black humor throughout *Land Without Bread*, Buñuel foregrounds more than just the pitiable state in which the Hurdanos live, which constitutes the normal ethnographic film record; he also draws attention to the neglect of the West in helping alleviate their unnecessary suffering.

One of the ways in which the film is darkly comic is its use of Brahms’ Fourth Symphony in juxtaposition with the blank expressions of the Hurdanos, and the narration that highlights their pitiable existence. This oral and visual pastiche which creates the black humor is cleverly applied in every scene; however there are some which stand apart. One of these darkest scenes is at the end of the film, in which the “midgets and cretins” are recorded. The high art sound of Brahms is humorously juxtaposed with the images and narration that classify these subjects as anything but high class and bourgeois. This pastiche creates a mocking portrait of society’s rejects. Buñuel’s choice of wording in the voice-over, in its matter-of-fact style and insensitive representation seems on the surface quite comical, yet every viewer knows, this element of humor is somehow disturbing. One could easily argue that the insensitivity of such wording as “choir of idiots” and “they are almost wild” is merely part of the culture in the 1930’s at which

time Buñuel made the film; political correctness had not yet truly been invented.

However the most important element that plays a crucial part in making the film darkly comic is the choice of musical score.

During this scene, one of the most strikingly deformed “idiots” suddenly rises from behind a hill. At this point the music swells to a low, ominous tone which instills fear in the viewer at the sight of this monster. This is an important scene to compare between the MOMA and the French versions. In the French version, the narrator explains the context of the surprise entrance of the new villager, telling the viewer before he is seen that they are playing hide-and-go-seek. It is much less ominous and darkly comical when he rises from behind the hill knowing the background information on what it is he is doing. However in the MOMA print I am studying, there is no mention of the context in which the man appears, and instead the narration merely states “here is another type of idiot.” While much of the differences in narration between these two versions can be attributed to the translation from the French, this is a scene that is obviously treated to be even sharper by Buñuel at the museum, by leaving out that entire piece of contextual information. Therefore black humor is often created by the combinations of musical score and details in the wording of the narration.

There are two other scenes to which I would like to refer for my analysis of Buñuel’s application of black humor. One of these scenes is very brief, and explains the diet of the Hurdanos in May and June. It is explained through the narration that their stock of potatoes and beans are depleted by this time of year, and that the only food they can eat to ward off starvation are unripe cherries. However by eating these, they get dysentery. The scene is particularly comical not only for the absurd surreality of their

impossible situation, but it is also darkly humorous because of the way Buñuel represents these elements on-screen. The whole dilemma over starvation and illness is summed up in one line, and it is spoken in the same matter-of-fact voice as are all the other scenes. The visual image of the straight faced Hurdanos busily eating from the scraggiest of fruit vines ever seen while the Fourth Symphony grandly plays on, creates an approach to the Other that is both a mockery of their misery, and a means of exploring the disadvantages of many people from developing towns.

The final scene of most interest in terms of its black humor is the scene of the snake bite. During their trek for fertilizer one of the men gets bitten by a snake. The visual footage of the oblivious and clearly depressed man is heightened in its absurdity because of the narration: “the serum is not deadly in itself, but the Hurdanos, attempting to cure it, infect themselves and die.” Had this information been withheld from viewers instead of withholding the playful context of the “idiots,” perhaps our perspectives would be different. We would understand the idiots and we would feel bad for the unlucky victim of the snake bite. However it is worth noting that once again certain scenes work so well because the details Buñuel chose to share or withhold stand out to every viewer. While there are many other examples of humorous pastiches throughout the film, the importance of their surrealist function is in their ability to slash the eyes of the viewer and promote the surrealists’ leftist politics.

Considering the surrealist politics of anti-materialistic, anti-complacent attitudes, it is not too difficult to associate Buñuel’s use of such ironic, black humor to make the Hurdanos’ incompatibility with life a political statement about the complacency and materialism of the West. Indeed, the second method of surrealist documentation is the

promotion of the surrealist politics of anti-complacency and anti-materialism in the West. Higginbotham sums up Buñuel's intentions nicely, "just as we are not to take *L'Age d'or* for the love story it often appears to be, it is not the horrors of *Las Hurdes* we are to dwell upon, but the toleration of such horrors by a comfortable Spanish bourgeoisie" (54). The Hurdanos are filmed in a context that highlights the neglect given them by those of us who are more fortunate, particularly as connected with religion. The film is using black humor to make a social commentary.

Indeed this second defining feature is the subversion of the form and function of Western attitudes to the Other, mockery through colonization in the lens. This mockery is reflecting the attitudes of both the one who is documenting, and the one who is viewing. Western culture produced the material of *Land Without Bread* through its own stereotyping and complacency. Therefore Buñuel has two targets: the filmmaker and the West which produces him and his morals. This is a film of advocacy for surrealist values. Buñuel unveils for the West the mockery through which we, the bourgeois viewers, see and portray the Other. Indeed, *Las Hurdes* is repressed by the bourgeoisie much the same way the unconscious is repressed in the horrors of human waking life.

One of the greatest examples of juxtaposition used by Buñuel which promotes surrealist politics is that contrast between religious sites and the existences of the everyday villagers. Knowing that surrealists considered religion one of the great enemies of liberation, because it is confined to the realm of waking logic and therefore able to result in tyranny, colonization, and the inferiority of others, it is not surprising that the religious aspects of the portrait are treated with ultimate bitter irony and subversion. In order to slash the complacent eye, Buñuel has created a dichotomy between the few who

have much (the members of religious orders) and the many who have little (the masses). This technique of narrative juxtaposition is crucial from the very beginning of the film in which the narration starts in Alberqua, focusing on the medieval architecture of its religious buildings. Following the scene after this where the bridegrooms perform their cock decapitation ceremony, Ba Secaro is introduced and described as the oasis of the area, where old monasteries stand empty save for one last Carmelite monk and his servants. The flora is described as rich and plentiful, the buildings are strong and secure, and the borders keep the fertile land safe and pleasant. However the only one who enjoys these pleasures is the old monk attended by his village servants. Immediately following this long description of the beauty of this particular region, the crew enters the neighboring village of Las Hurdes, in which everything goes wrong, and everyone else lives. They can not grow a successful harvest of crops because the soil in this land is barren. They contract malaria because almost every water source carries infected mosquitoes. They wear rags and sleep in dirty, impoverished homes because they lack money and opportunity.

This dichotomous relationship between the privileged church and the miserable, forsaken villagers is clinched at the end of the film when there is a brief and direct comparison of a church interior and the typical Hurdano home interior. The great wealth devoted to the church where no one sleeps or eats is appalling when conveniently juxtaposed with the places the people actually inhabit. It is clear then that Buñuel is trying to make some kind of commentary if he is blatantly comparing one thing to the other. His use of pastiche within the narrative highlights the extreme poverty of the

people in contrast with their offerings to God; a God, Buñuel reminds us, who does not give these people bread.

However the scene which most blatantly points to this important notion of Western capitalism, rampant materialism, and over-fed complacency is the scene within the school house. While there is no church symbol to represent Western values and illogic, it is made very clear to the viewer that these have-nots are mere puppets in the hands of the haves. The narration describes the children as “impoverished” while saying that they are taught that “the sum of the angles of a triangle equals two right angles.” The narration explains the pitiful adoption of these children called “bidou” while the camera pans up a wall in the classroom and the narrator says, “we discover a shocking and disturbing picture on the classroom wall. What is this absurd picture doing here?” The picture is of a bourgeois lady fully dressed with hoop skirt and bonnet. Then one of the best students goes to the board and writes out from memory a maxim “randomly selected” from a book on morality that lay in the classroom. The maxim is, ironically, “respect the property of others.” Higginbotham sums the point up well for this scene, and indeed she is speaking for the film in its entirety when she writes, it “goes beyond documentary to social criticism and indicts a European society so obsessed with private property that starving peasants are fed on capitalist refrains instead of bread” (51).

The third surrealist aspect of the film is its interrogation of ethnographic filmmaking traditions which presume that logic and rational thought will lead to a truthful portrait. Several events within the film are documented to be the result of Buñuel’s intervention, not the pure chance to which the film alludes. The famous scene where the mountain goat accidentally falls off the cliff to the accompaniment of the

Fourth Symphony, is clearly staged; the viewer witnesses the explosion of gunpowder on the side of the frame just as the goat begins to fall. Film critic Bill Nichols wrote of this scene, “Buñuel’s representation of the incident seems to contain a wink: he seems to be hinting to us that this is *not* a factual representation of Hurdano life as he found it or an unthinkingly offensive judgment of it but a *criticism* or *exposé* of the forms of representation common to the depiction of traditional peoples” (9).

I would agree that Buñuel is critiquing the colonialist representation of the Other by Western filmmakers; however I believe it connects more closely to surrealism. Buñuel is slashing the eye of the viewer by showing the audience how truth can be so easily manipulated by restricting our waking minds to the reign of logic. Other scenes, such as the one which takes place in the school house and Buñuel randomly opens to a capitalist maxim seems awfully ironic, and the donkey devoured by bees is of course killed because of Buñuel’s hive tipping. While such set-ups were critiques of representation in early ethnographic filmmaking, it is a much larger issue than that. Buñuel is indicting the filmmakers, products of the West, and the viewers of the bourgeoisie, with distorting truth through the ignorance of logic, and allowing for misery through complacency. If Buñuel shot the goat and killed the donkey, Western bourgeois audiences laughed at it tumbling, snickered at it being stung, and blamed the Hurdanos for the filth in their water.

Land Without Bread clearly utilizes a popular ethnographic format for documenting the people; however Buñuel manipulates that format to expose the hidden truth through black humor, social critiques on Western complacency, and an interrogation of the reign of logic. By using the well known mold for ethnography, Buñuel has undermined its credibility by accompanying its footage with the Fourth Symphony, shooting a goat, and

certainly in contrasting the haves of the West with the have-nots of Las Hurdes. Modern film critic Brian Winston seems to have finally caught up with Buñuel in this regard in 1995 when he discusses his view of the inherent problems the genre of documentary film faces in trying to reconcile the differences between image and reality (6). He suggests that the documentary film is at a serious disadvantage in its inception and reception due to the general misunderstanding of both filmmaker and critic over such a dichotomy, and ways of getting around it. The problem is magnified, he argues, by the severe lack of attention given to documentary theory. This combination of uncertainty and neglect has left the documentary genre in a compromised position. Winston explains,

Public reception of the documentary still turns on an unproblematised acceptance of cinematic mimesis. Documentaries have, for years, obfuscated basic issues so that they could, at one and the same time, claim journalistic/scientific and (contradictory) artistic privileges. When they have paid attention, scholars, by and large, have avoided questions of definition. As a result, the documentary, unclear as to its legitimations and confused as to its *raison d'être*, is thus not in a good position to counter current threats (6).

His concerns over the relationship between the image and the reality it represents are shared by every other poststructuralist film critic, and contribute one of the fundamental approaches to the modern study of the documentary film genre for modern film theorists.

The narration that seems so cold and insensitive in *Land Without Bread* actually reflects the perspectives of the complacent Western viewer. This is a documentation of reality; however it takes surrealism's transcendence of logic to see the larger truth of social inequality. Therefore Buñuel's greatest achievement as I see it in creating this new

genre of surrealist documentary is its ability to situate the subjects within a complete social context; Buñuel does not just describe the Hurdanos' customs and diet, he indicts, subversively, the institutions which cause their suffering, and directly explores the problems with logic and representation.

It is this subversive, almost sneaky attack on the Western viewer that, in my opinion creates an ethnography of social activism, a surreality of black humor, and a liberation from the reign of logic. While audiences will always remember his famous beginning scene in *Un Chien andalou* of the eye slashing, the entire film *Land Without Bread* is an attack on the Western viewer's sight and perspective. Buñuel could have documented the misery around him in Las Hurdes with much more factual information and no music or at least more fitting music; however he instead chose to create a film in a format viewers were used to seeing as fact while subversively slashing their eyes through the humor of a leftist surrealist. It is indeed then a difficult film for many to interpret, because it is not to be taken at face value. While viewers have no reason to believe that the facts in the narration and visual footage are inaccurate, they are puzzled by the film's insensitivity and unusual choice of subjects. It is therefore imperative, I believe, to place this film within its complete historical and artistic context to derive its ultimate meaning, just as the film itself creates a completely contextual view of life in Las Hurdes and *why* life there is so miserable. The voice-over narration is every bourgeois viewer's voice, and the representation of the Hurdanos' pitiful existence is the condition put upon them by the complacency and blindness of the Western bourgeoisie.

Considering its extreme departure from other early ethnographic films, indeed from any other documentaries, the surrealist documentary truly is a unique genre which

combines both the surrealist and early ethnographic film traditions. Without considering the film's connection to both these genres, even the most critical viewer of the film will be fooled. Buñuel's surrealist documentary was a groundbreaking film for its time, and certainly remains in that position today. In 1933, Buñuel sounded an alarm which no film studies or anthropology critics would heed until decades later. Somehow *Land Without Bread* was not given its due at its initial release; the film was greeted with resentment and confusion by the Western bourgeoisie for which it was made. Even academics did not embrace this film and still do not give full treatment to its incredible sophistication and social criticism. There is hardly any English language literature on the film and there is little else besides the criticism of Higginbotham and Ibarz which contextualizes the film or goes to some depth to analyze the underlying meanings behind this odd surface portrait of the Other. Buñuel's film has been neglected by the West until recently and its important visionary methods and purposes have been left out of the evolution of both documentary and ethnographic film.

Between Buñuel's introduction of social commentary to ethnographic filmmaking and contemporary ethnographic film, researchers such as Margaret Mead began to establish anthropologically-informed ethnographic films. Early ethnography films of the exotic such as *Nanook of the North* and *Chang* were made for mass entertainment by those untrained in anthropology. The beginnings of anthropologically-informed ethnographic film, however, can be traced to the work of Margaret Mead in the 1930's through the 1950's which established logic and science as the basis of the ethnographer's quest. Mead's films, however, were more often recorded field notes than fully realized films, not much more than a way of remembering and recording the everyday and the

unusual within the cultures being studied. These ethnographic films were the visual equivalent of note-taking: unedited pieces of footage for use in research. But these films were also used pedagogically, as a means of educating the non-anthropologist.

Mead's *Trance and Dance in Bali* (1952 release, shot in the 1930's) and *Four Families* (1950) represent two of her most famous examples of ethnographic film combining field footage and pedagogy for the masses. In *Trance and Dance* Mead shoots in a completely straightforward way, avoiding using shots chosen for their artistic quality. This is as far from Buñuel's subversion as can be. Mead focuses the camera's attention on the featured dance in its entirety in long shot, and uses only the occasional close up to highlight steps of particular anthropological importance. Throughout the film, she reads in voice-over her brief verbal notes for future reference. *Four Families* explores the similarities and differences in child rearing practices with infants in four different families from four very different cultures around the world. Mead provides voice-over commentary which is strictly pedagogical, strictly logical, also using a very direct method of interpretation. Mead believed that anthropology was meant to be accessible and interesting for all, and it was Mead who was the first to continuously promote the serious use of the motion picture camera within the field of anthropology. Although she made a great effort at popularizing anthropology with the general public, she was a scientist who consistently used logic as a means of investigation.

However this strictly scientific approach to the ethnographic film within the field would soon be challenged when ethnographic filmmakers realized that art could be included in the record. This new kind of ethnographic film became a possibility in 1957 when John Marshall released *The Hunters*. This groundbreaking feature combined both

the artistic, cinematic perspective of a filmmaker, and the scientific observation and logic of anthropological study. Within *The Hunters* Marshall uses poetic narration, highly edited footage, arbitrary information visually and orally, and cinematic angles which give an unrealistic view of the action. Such wording as, “then it was time to cut off the feet as heavy as stones” and that one of the men brought back meat, “because of his wife’s breasts full of milk and the son she’d given him” shows that Marshall has strayed significantly from Mead in using narration to infuse more than observation to the visual text; Marshall creates a sense of place, and acknowledges film’s self-reflexivity. There are many shots within the film as well which are considered superfluous and unnecessary to anthropologists concerned with facts: dramatic low angle shots to instill a sense of power in the men as they hunt, powerful high angle shots that often distort the view of the subject through framing them differently, and the occasional shot of flora or fauna which are suppose to represent the passage of hours. Marshall excludes hours of information valuable to anthropologists in favor of a dramatic story. Because of this attention to visual style, Marshall frames his portrait of the !Kung as much with artistic ambitions as he does with an attention to anthropology.

However, Marshall’s work was later criticized extensively by anthropologists and even by himself. His footage was, much like Flaherty’s work, often reenacted and staged, and the methods of hunting were not true to the realities of the time. Marshall also chose to romanticize the noble efforts of human against nature, and in his use of manipulative editing he managed to create a mythical tale, but not one too concerned with the anthropological information. In a sense, he recreated *Nanook* in the desert of Africa. Ironically, he too was not a trained anthropologist, much like Robert Flaherty.

Marshall himself criticized his film publicly on many occasions, “When I was shooting *The Hunters* (1957), my thoughts and feelings showed up in almost all the angles and distances I used as well as in my choice of events to film. *The Hunters* was a romantic film by an American kid and revealed more about me than about Ju/’hoansi” (qtd in Ruby 39).

This blatant manipulation of experiential reality to produce an epic story was, however, what made *The Hunters* so fresh and appealing to the general audience. The film did include useful anthropological information which could easily be integrated in the classroom for effective pedagogy. However, the artiness which guides the content of the film has always and will always be a concern for anthropologists. In fact, Marshall’s father Laurence summed up the anthropological response to the film at its release, and many would agree, is still in favor today; he said to his son upon handing him the video camera in the Kalahari desert: “Don’t direct, John. Don’t try to be artistic. Just film what you see people doing naturally. I want a record, not a movie” (qtd in Ruby 19).

Marshall’s film was to prove the crossroads between ethnographic documentation and cinematic filmmaking. This is the essential paradox within visual anthropology even today: the demands of filmmaking and the research methods of anthropologists are often at odds. Anthropologists approach the representation of a culture through scientific observation, rationality, and logic, and filmmakers are concerned less with revealing objective truth than with emotional and psychological resonance, willing to exploit angles, color, and close ups for emotional effect. The differences between these two approaches is fundamental.

Although it has been seventy three years since Buñuel's introduction of social commentary to ethnographic filmmaking, contemporary ethnographic film is finally beginning to incorporate social critique. I am unaware of any subversive surrealist techniques within contemporary ethnographic films, because anthropology is still a field based on scientific observation and logic. However I have found portraits of the Other in current ethnographic films that, like Buñuel's *Land Without Bread*, employ activist themes and purposes. For instance, John Marshall's film *A Kalahari Family* (2002) documents not just the hunting rituals, but also the social, political and economic climate within the Kalahari during Western colonial expansion. His final six hour-long film edits together decades worth of footage shot on location, and chronicles the decline of the Ju/'hoansi's traditional and natural way of life. It shows Marshall's direct activism within the political and social reforms that took place in the Kalahari. He was an activist off camera, but he was also an activist in his filming because he used the tool of cinema as a vehicle for advocacy of the rights of these indigenous people.

Currently many ethnographic films are shifting their purpose to activism. Just about all current releases from one of the biggest documentary distribution companies, Documentary Educational Resources, advocate for cultural rights across the globe. Considering this new trend, it is not unreasonable to assert that Buñuel's concern with advocacy of the Other is perhaps finally resonating with newer ethnographic filmmakers. Although it has been decades since he created the first contextually complete look at the Other, Buñuel does appear to have inspired anthropologists now adopting a philosophy of activism.

It is clear that Buñuel was significantly ahead of his time. Academia has begun to explore the surface of surrealist documentary, but sadly has not gone deep enough. While this is far from an exhaustive study of Buñuel's 1933 masterpiece, it does point in a new direction and engenders a new series of questions which I believe need to be answered by film and anthropology scholars alike: is the surrealist documentary the only form of ethnographic film that questions representation itself? Do black humor, social critique of the bourgeoisie, and the interrogation of logic need to be a part of other new surrealist documentaries? Is subversive activism a more liberating form of documentary filmmaking? Is it time for ethnographic film to acknowledge consistently that objectivity is merely a myth? Shall we wield more razor blades at the eyes of the Western complacent bourgeoisie and show them their blindness to their effects on the Other?

Certainly Buñuel deserves much more attention than he has received in the past or is even now receiving. I consider it very important that both the fields of film studies and anthropology resurrect the stark images of Buñuel's surrealist documentary and expose students to their power. I hope that along with this change, the scholarship on Buñuel will continue to grow and focus in more depth on *Land Without Bread*. Buñuel's groundbreaking surrealist documentary creates what Breton referred to in the "Second Manifesto" as that "point of the mind" (124) which not only brings the dream state into the waking consciousness, but indeed changes our experience of reality. A scholarship must be established around Buñuel's groundbreaking surrealist documentary and its use of black humor, critique of the bourgeoisie, and interrogation of logic in order to learn now what Buñuel already knew in 1933.

In a world in which Western powers dominate more than ever, and crises in non-Western societies are sadly a constant source of news, surrealist documentary could not be timelier and indeed more important. Until the seemingly impossible happens and superpowers are humbled and humanity is equally valued throughout the world, there will always be a need for Buñuels who are willing to shake those fragile bubbles of Western complacency. Now more than ever we need to pay great attention to Buñuel's work because, as his most recent critic puts it, "in even his most minor film Buñuel's signature as the great scourge of the bourgeoisie is unmistakable" (Evans 3). Today more than ever we must prove, both in theory and in practice, that Buñuel's activism is alive and revolution is not dead.

“Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions. Now, search as one may one will never find any other motivating force in the activities of the Surrealists than the hope of finding and fixing that point”

(Breton 124)

“After our two month stay among the Hurdanos, we left the country.

FIN”

(Land Without Bread 1933)

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