

## Resurrecting the Stylite Simon: Buñuel's Surrealist History Film

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### Abstract

This paper discusses a relatively little known film by Luis Buñuel, specifically in terms of its ability to examine the relationship of both Surrealist ideology and the cinematic medium to the process of writing history. Arguing that *Simón del desierto/Simon of the Desert* (1965) represents a radical critique of the authority of both history and the indexicality of photographic signifiers, the paper looks to shed light upon the subtleties of Buñuel's method as a historiographer working within a post-positivist ideology based on the notion of doubt.

The film narrates the life of Saint Simeon Stylites, a fifth-century Syrian famed for standing atop a column in the desert for forty years. Though based on a 'true' story, *Simon of the Desert* is a film replete with anachronisms and Surrealist ruptures, which work to undo the film's own claims to historicity. The film, in other words, eloquently constructs and deconstructs itself simultaneously. While the film's ruptures might be dismissed on the grounds that they simply represent Buñuelian black humor, or the aesthetics of Surrealist juxtaposition, this paper will argue that the film's incongruities also function at a deeper level, critiquing the ideological foundations of modern historiography, in a manner rooted not only in the aesthetics, but also in the radical politics of the Surrealist movement.

### At the Intersection of History, Film, and Surrealism

Working in Mexico in 1965 for producer Gustavo Alatriste, Luis Buñuel ran out of money while filming *Simon of the Desert*. The hastily completed film would run only forty-five minutes in its entirety, though it had initially been intended to be feature length. Situated chronologically between the chic French heroine films *The Diary of a Chambermaid* (1963) and *Belle de Jour* (1967), Buñuel's meditation on the 'real' life of Byzantine St. Simeon Stylitus has often been overlooked in critical discussions of the *auteur's* late 'masterpieces'. Perhaps this is due to a latent francophilia within the critical discourse, as well as to several more pragmatic factors, such as the film's unconventional duration, its low budget, and its somewhat anomalous subject matter. The notion that *Simon's* content is *somewhat anomalous* is significant here, as the film is indeed quite 'Buñuelian' in a number of aspects, even sharing several actors already familiar to Buñuel's followers,<sup>1</sup> while also plainly privileging many of his so-called *obsessions*, notably sexuality and Catholicism. But the manifest subject, the biography of a fifth-century Syrian ascetic makes this, in effect, Buñuel's only history film.<sup>2</sup> As such, it provides a rare opportunity to examine the product of a unique form of historiography with implications for both the medium of film and the aesthetics and ideology of Surrealism.

With regard to the cinema, several scholars in recent times have investigated the question of film's ability to function as historiography in its own right. In the process, they have had to reckon with conventional arguments *against* the legitimacy of the film as a historical medium, which may be summarized as follows: 1) popular films in particular prioritise entertainment over accuracy; 2) too many details are necessarily improvised, as films are both visually and verbally specific about elements which cannot be confirmed; 3) films can only *present* episodes; they cannot theorize them;



4) films cannot be 'footnoted' and thus do not reflect the diversity of the discourse on any given subject.

It may be worth noting, however, that the motives informing these first two arguments seem somewhat at odds with those of the second pair, given that the concerns regarding theory and footnotes seem to advocate the complication and critique of historiographic discourse, while those regarding accuracy and specificity seem rooted in the positivist notion that history's goal is to arrive at the truth of the past, in such a way that improvisations and narrative manipulations are inappropriate and have no place.

Implicitly negotiating the conflicting methodological assumptions outlined above, Robert Rosenstone, in particular, has argued that filmmaking *can* viably function as a form of history, not necessarily subordinate or inferior to written texts.<sup>3</sup> Following Hayden White, he has suggested, for example, that film's adherence to cinematic convention only mimics the fact that written texts, whether popular or academic, similarly obey their own conventions. Neither one nor the other, therefore, can claim to be unmediated by the horizon of expectation of their medium. Furthermore, he has suggested that films to be numbered among the 'New History Film' genre, most of which were produced in the 1980s and appear to be conscious on some level of theories of postmodernism, have made important contributions to discourses both of history and historiography.<sup>4</sup> While Buñuel's *Simon of the Desert* has not been officially ranked among these films, I would like to propose that it too provides a significant meditation upon and critique of the process of history writing, one which furthermore meaningfully reflects the charged ideological agendas of Surrealism. Indeed, as I will discuss shortly, the film ranks among those which provide abundant evidence of the importance of Surrealism for Buñuel, even in his late work. More specifically, however, this film provides occasion to discuss the potential of the process of narrating and imaging history to function as a form of Surrealist critique.

While *Simon* postdates Buñuel's formal affiliation with the Surrealist group in Paris by three decades, his interest in the subject stems back to his student days in Madrid, when, according to Buñuel, Federico García Lorca introduced him to the thirteenth-century hagiographic text, *The Golden Legend or Lives of the Saints*. This text's pages actually do *not* include an account of St. Simeon Stylitus, who lived out his life in Syria standing, like all good stylites, atop a column;<sup>5</sup> but regardless of the source, he would claim to have been attracted to the story of Simon precisely because it fused the quotidian and the marvellous, in a manner which would come to typify later Surrealist practice. Specifically, Buñuel has claimed that Lorca called his attention to a passage both lyrical and immanently earthly stating that Simon's excrement flowed down the column like wax from a candle. (Though Buñuel would repeatedly cite this episode when discussing the genesis of the film, the image itself was not realized within it, a contradiction whose significance will be discussed at the close of this essay).



## Narrative Overview

The title sequence opens onto a procession of chanting monks and peasants, which culminates in the presentation of a new column to the title character, masterfully portrayed by Claudio Brook. Viewers of the film soon learn both that the new column has been dedicated by a wealthy merchant, and that Simon is consequently abandoning the original column, upon which he has stood for six years, six months, and six days. During the brief moment in which Simon's feet are upon the ground, he rejects two gestures that are made toward him, one from his mother, who wishes to embrace him, and the other from the officiating priest who wishes to ordain him. Telling the former that 'earthly love cannot come between the Lord and his servants' and the latter that he is a sinner unworthy of the priesthood, Simon ascends his new column, with the intent, presumably, of being closer to God. No sooner does he reach the top, however, than he is implored from below by a peasant whose hands have been cut off as a punishment for stealing. Showing no signs of being taken aback by the man's pleading, Simon leads the crowd in prayer, after which the man's hands miraculously reappear. (Buñuel creates this effect through simple edits and cropping, 'cutting off' the man's elevated hands with the frame of a close-up shot.) Without hesitation, or expression of gratitude, the peasant hurries his family along stating that they have work to do. When his young daughter asks 'Are they really the same hands, father?' he orders her to 'shut up,' and uses his new hands to slap her on the back of the head.

The next incident marks the first appearance of Silvia Pinal's character, as she provocatively saunters past the monks attending prayer at the base of Simon's column. Her role as an instigator of conflict is fulfilled when Simon tricks one of the monks into admitting that he has leered at her. Once the monks have left, however, she returns for Simon alone, dressed anachronistically in a little girl's sailor suit from the *belle époque*. As she sings to him of her kingdom, it becomes clear, both to Simon and to the viewer, that she is the devil, who has come to tempt him. Through another simple trick edit, she appears suddenly on top of the column, where she tugs at Simon's beard, shows him her long tongue, and pierces his back with a lengthy needle. Simon manages to resist both the pleasure and the pain that she offers, but as the scorned devil consequently runs off across the desert in the nude body of an elderly hag, she shakes her fist at him, promising that she will be back.

In short intervals throughout the film, the patterns of Simon's life atop the column unfold. He sings praises to God almost incessantly, but occasionally shows signs of human frailty, in one instance stumbling and forgetting the next line of his recitation, and in another daydreaming that he is on the ground with his mother, free to feel the earth under his feet and to bond with the woman he had previously refused. Indeed, her role, though limited and virtually without speech, becomes one of the most poignant aspects of the film, as she lives humbly in a small tent on the ground within sight of her son's column. She watches him and occasionally waves to him as if thinking that he has noticed her, but her efforts are never rewarded. In Simon's reverie, however, he imagines that she asks him, while he rests his head in her lap: 'Do you ever think of me?' Simon's reply is: 'Hardly ever. I don't



have time.' To a modern audience, the isolated, ascetic stylite may appear to have nothing but time, but this simple remark succinctly indicates that his struggle for purity overwhelms him ceaselessly.<sup>6</sup>

On an occasion when the monks have joined Simon for a sermon on the benefits of asceticism, a brother by the name of Trifon surreptitiously places bread, wine, and cheese into Simon's bag, which hangs down from the top of the column so that he may be provided with the water and lettuce leaves that sustain him physically. Trifon feigns surprise as he pretends to discover the luxury goods, and then accuses Simon of hypocrisy and deceit. When called upon to defend himself, Simon remarks only that slander is more soothing to a humble soul than praise. Trifon, however, suggests to his brothers that the indirectness of Simon's response is tantamount to proof of guilt. The head brother calls upon the Holy Spirit to reveal the truth, a gesture which soon after sends Trifon to the ground, cursing and frothing at the mouth, in spasms of demonic possession. The resulting chaos reveals the potential for confusion and human fallibility among the community of monks.

One day, in mid-prayer, Simon takes note of an approaching flock of sheep, led by a bearded figure in classical garb. Simon recognizes the teary-eyed figure as a suffering Christ, but upon being instructed by the figure to give up his penance and to indulge in the pleasures of the flesh, Simon realizes that he has been duped by the devil, who is here, too, portrayed by Pinal, wearing what is obviously a false beard and a garment that does little to disguise her feminine body. Time passes ambiguously in the film, but we learn in her address to Simon that he has now stood upon his column for eight years, eight months, and eight days. Having realized the error of his perception, however, Simon again scornfully refuses the devil. Frustrated a second time, she can only promise him that he has still not seen the last of her, before shooting him in the forehead with a stone propelled by a slingshot. As she vanishes into a cloud of smoke, a trick edit transforms one of her lambs into a frog, while Simon himself concludes that he still has 'far to go,' after having mistaken the wolf for the lamb. Consequently, he determines to intensify his penance by standing on one foot until the Lord commands him otherwise.

Another peasant man, who was first met cursing Simon for not accepting his gift of goat milk, is the next to visit the stylite, in order to ask him the favour of blessing his pregnant goat. When Simon replies, 'And bless you, too,' however, the impatient goatherd becomes angry that Simon has blessed him and his goat in a single gesture. Proclaiming that he still likes Simon anyway, the peasant asks the saint if his belly doesn't ache from hunger, to which the ascetic responds that he requires little sustenance, and that he excretes dryly, 'much like your goats.'<sup>7</sup> Played by Jesús Fernández, who was himself no more the three feet tall, the goatherd is far from Simon elevated on his column. He walks off, shrugging and saying, 'All I understood was dryly,' a small bit of wry humour, which succinctly illustrates the insurmountability of the distance between them. One literally cannot understand the other.

The saint's next visitor is the monk whom Simon previously cast away for looking at the devil as she walked past earlier in the film. After apologizing for his behaviour, the monk laments that the heathen are advancing upon Rome, and that man will do terrible things for that which he thinks is his. Here, however, it is Simon who is simply unable to comprehend the situation, asking the unthinkable



innocent question: What do *yours* and *mine* mean? 'Your unselfishness is admirable,' the brother tells him, 'but of little use in the world of men.'

In making her final appearance, the devil arrives at Simon's column in what would seem to be a self-propelling coffin (though Buñuel himself would later lament that the ropes used to pull it were all too visible). This time, after a brief theological debate, she tells Simon that he is coming with her to a black mass; then she gestures into the heavens where an airplane passes overhead. The film cuts to a long-shot of Simon's column which reveals it standing empty, before editing in disorienting and vertiginous images of urban skyscrapers, then finally cutting to the interior of a nightclub. A long, slow pan of the fervently dancing crowd is followed by a brief conversation between Simon and the devil, both of whom are entirely contemporary in their appearance, with the bearded, pipe-smoking Simon outfitted as a beatnik. 'What's this dance called,' he asks her calmly. 'Radioactive flesh,' is her reply; 'It's the latest and the last.' When Simon tells her to have fun, but that he is going back, she informs him that he cannot, because his column has a new tenant. 'You just have to take it,' she says, getting up to join the dance. Uttering the film's final line, she reiterates, 'You just have to take it until the end.'

## Surrealist Historiography

What then is to be made of these words and pictures, so riddled with anachronism, rupture, and contradictory impulses of faith and disbelief? As I have previously suggested, I would like to propose that Buñuel's treatment of the subject represents more than characteristic Buñuelian atheism and black humour, but rather that these features function to set the stage for a larger analysis of historiographic practice. Indeed the film assumes broader critical implications, pertaining both to the politics and mechanisms of Surrealist cultural criticism and to the historiographic possibilities of the medium of cinema. Specifically, *Simon of the Desert* functions as critique by deconstructing the notion of history itself, through a process of performatively revealing not only that history is necessarily authored and that it invariably inflects contemporary agendas, but also that the past, in its virtual incomprehensibility to the present, may serve provocatively to relativize our own contemporary ideological assumptions, exposing them as such in the process. It is my contention that such relativization was at the very heart of the Surrealist project, which provocatively - and very explicitly - relativized the concept of reality itself in order to expose the 'paucity' of bourgeois thinking.<sup>8</sup> While many of the aforementioned points of historiographic criticism may seem readily familiar from recent methodological discourses challenging the positivist assumptions of past historians, in *Simon of the Desert*, they are - and indeed *were* in 1965 - compellingly articulated not by a professional historian authoring an academic treatise, but rather by an at-large Surrealist utilizing the tools of the cinema.

For example, in the very first scene alone, numerous elements highlight the notion that the worldview of the early Christian era is patently absurd from the vantage point of the twentieth century. To begin, of course, is the very premise of the stylite. As if it were inevitable, countless ancient cultures have embraced the notion that elevated forms, such as pyramids, sacred mountains, or acropoli, bring one literally closer to the gods. Indeed, Early Christian imagery frequently made use of



conventions visualizing the model of the universe which maintains that the earth is flat, and that heaven is a massive blue dome containing it. Though not widely visualized until later medieval times, hell is similarly conceptualised as a space physically underneath the disk of the terrestrial realm. Simon, then, atop his column goes to great lengths to achieve a literal, physical elevation as an early medieval subject for whom the sky is synonymous with heaven. This belief, of course, has not been sustainable in the west for centuries, due to the simple knowledge that the earth is round, and that *up*, consequently, is a relative rather than an absolute direction. The materiality of the 'fact' of the world's roundness has outweighed the symbolism of faith in our post-positivist culture to such a degree that Simon's gesture can at best be read as poignantly misguided.<sup>9</sup> Even among contemporaries who would claim to share Simon's faith in Christ, the literalness of his action is quite unlikely to be duplicated. As contemporary viewers, in other words, we can feel for Simon, but not without a degree of condescension. While the absurdity of the faithful stylite's blatant naivety might well be taken as an indicator of Buñuel's own lack of belief, implying by extension that any act of faith after Galileo is absurd, the atheist director contradictorily gives us the miracle of the peasant's new hands. He therefore seems to perform the unlikely task of asking his audience to believe in miracles. Yet this, too, comes to signify the degree to which the faith of early Christian cultures vastly exceeds our own, precisely because as 'modern' viewers, we are surprised and taken aback by this miracle which seems to strike the faithful crowd as entirely commonplace. As Buñuel himself has commented: 'Today a priest would open an ecclesiastical investigation into a miracle like that,' but 'the man [in the film] must have thought, "He is a miraculous saint; it's natural that he performed this miracle for me."' <sup>10</sup>

While efforts to study historical subjects within a contextualized framework may assist in making historical ideologies appear plausible on their own terms, they are necessarily limited and mediated both by contemporary expectations and by authorial agendas. In this case, Buñuel patently fictionalised the incident of Simon's miracle to illustrate a point that he wished to make. Thus in presenting the 'truth' of the idea that the past is beyond our comprehension, Buñuel also repeatedly reminds us more directly that this is *his* view of the past, and implicitly, that it is *his* agenda to make us realize its incomprehensibility from our own vantage point. But this function may be performed most succinctly in the presentation of the devil as she appears to tempt Simon on top of the column for the first time. She is a double anachronism, as a woman dressed in a child's costume - underscoring the perverse irony of her comment that she is 'an innocent little girl' with 'innocent little legs' - while at the same time, of course, her clothing is in a fashion disruptively out of sync with those of all of the other characters. (Buñuel has claimed, in particular, that her costume represents the moment of his own erotic awakening in Spain in the early twentieth century.) A rupture within the historical illusion is created, therefore, which directs attention to the fact that this story is being brought to us by one historically situated to possess knowledge of - and great feeling for - *belle époque* couture. At the same time, however, the recognition of this moment of patent artifice encourages the viewer to realize, furthermore, that everyone else in the film is wearing a costume, too. Even those who seem appropriately clad for the period are dressed in a vision of the past far removed from the historical



moment. (Rearticulating this sense of rupture is our contemporary distance from the film itself. When Pinal emerges from the coffin to tempt Simon for the third and final time, her hair and makeup may well strike a twenty-first century viewer as very 'period,' in a way in which they likely would not have at the time of the film's release in 1965.)

*Simon of the Desert*, therefore, performatively - rather than didactically - functions to illustrate that the past is necessarily viewed through filters and mediated by the present. As previously suggested, this in itself is hardly a revolutionary point for those submerged in contemporary historiographic discourse. Yet I would suggest that it is significant nonetheless, in part because the notion of history as the truth of the past is still widely assumed outside of academic discourse. Indeed, as several contributors to Rosenstone's anthology *Revisioning History* have noted, historical films are still widely evaluated according to a faithful standard of pseudo-positivist 'accuracy.'<sup>11</sup> Yet the point is all the more significant because film has been critiqued as a medium incapable of conveying methodological subtleties. As I have argued, I believe that *Simon of the Desert* successfully refutes this point.

I would add, however, that in loyal Surrealist form, Buñuel's critique goes on to suggest that while we cannot escape our own cultural and ideological baggage with regard to history, relativizing it is still an immensely useful exercise. In the final sequence of the film, we of the 'modern' world look at Simon looking at us. Though the sense of his anachronistic position is minimized by his assimilated appearance, the rupture caused by his unexpected presence in a western twentieth-century nightclub functions to encourage viewers to distance themselves and to see the scene before us through Simon's eyes. Doing so, we divorce ourselves from our own recognition of the setting as a nightclub filled with music and dancing to perceive the sights and sounds for what they are when removed from the framework of modern cultural knowledge that gives them meaning: they are loud noises and writhing bodies jammed into a crowded, dark and smoky space. While Simon's question 'What's this dance called?' suggests that on some level he can recognize their gestures as a dance, at the same time, seen in the context of earlier episodes, the convulsions of the dancers seem strikingly reminiscent of the spasms of Brother Trifon while he is possessed. Thus the scene of our modern world, from an early medieval point of view, looks much like hell itself, as it has been rhetoricized and visualized in Christian thought and imagery.<sup>12</sup> We may therefore find ourselves reminded that the mores and costumes of our own time appear just as absurd to Simon as those of his time do to us. Through such realizations, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain the flattering notion that history is a linear narrative leading to and culminating in our own present.<sup>13</sup> This notion, derived from positivist thought, is thus performatively critiqued in succinct and uniquely cinematic terms.

I have already suggested that although Buñuel would withdraw from formal Surrealist association as early as the 1930s, he and his films would maintain an allegiance to the basic ideology of the Surrealist project, particularly with regard to its complicated practices of deconstructive cultural criticism. Indeed, the historical relativism of *Simon of the Desert* which I have discussed might be understood as a process of creative critique which illuminates, and is illuminated, by basic tenets of



Surrealism. With regard to the Surrealists' relationship to the problem of history, it is further worth noting that the Surrealists' celebration of chance as a revolutionary principle, can be - and has been - linked to the potential of chance to disrupt and undermine the bourgeois notion of history as progress. In his essay 'As in a Wood', for example, André Breton would hail Charles Fourier specifically on the grounds that: 'Only [he] had enough revolutionary vision to argue and demonstrate that the whole of cultural development of humanity did not follow the direction it did out of any internal necessity but as a result of various pressures that might have been different and might have been borne differently.'<sup>14</sup> Thus the notion of a history motivated by chance occurrences has the potential to subvert the belief that contemporary industry, capitalism, and democracy represent the inevitable push of progress. In other words, our entire set of contemporary cultural values is in fact relative to and contingent upon the chance events which have determined them. Though Buñuel's film appears not to aim explicitly toward the omnipotence of chance in history, as I have suggested, the dark conclusion of *Simon of the Desert* does emphatically undermine the notion of progress in history, opening to doubt the validity of modern cultural assumptions of the validity of modern culture itself.

### **Additional Remarks on Cinematic Specificity**

Like the ideology of *Simon of the Desert*, the film's 'aesthetic', both verbal and visual, would similarly conform to Surrealist standards, particularly in its use of jarringly incongruous juxtapositions. But for the most part, as with virtually all of his later films, Buñuel's 'magical realist' technique seems relatively restrained and even strangely 'classical' in comparison to contemporaries such as Jean-Luc Godard, at least in the degree to which it generally avoided unusual framings, camera movement and other devices which call attention to the director's 'hand'. Thus it might be noted that Buñuel's critique of history takes places almost entirely on the level of narrative. But the visuality of the film does play an important role in a number of respects, further supporting arguments of the potency of the cinema as a historiographic vehicle.

While *Simon of the Desert* indeed lacks even an approximation of footnotes, as I have argued, Buñuel was able to visually complicate the discourse of history by upsetting visual conventions of continuity in film, as in the case of the devil's anachronistic *belle époque* costume. Yet the film also addresses the theme of the potential falsity of appearances and our ability to be deceived by our own expectations, in the process, deconstructively raising the viewer's awareness of the fact that we harbour such expectations in the first place. For example, Sylvia Pinal is completely unconvincing as the Good Shepherd. Her false beard, wig, and costume are not able to disguise the fact that she is an artifice-laden woman in drag. Simon, however, believes her to be not only the Good Shepherd, but also Christ himself. This scene, then, implicitly functions as a critique of iconographic signification, in that she is able to fool him simply by donning the trappings of an iconographic convention.<sup>15</sup> In other words, Simon all too readily takes her for the realization of a metaphor made potent through discursive currency. Other scenes in the film do suggest that the devil is powerful enough to alter her physical form, yet she does so in this scene only through the



superficialities of costume, suggesting, perhaps, that that is enough to deceive one with expectations based on the language of visual signs. In the case of Simon, he is looking to understand the world in the terms of that which he has already learned, and this makes him vulnerable to her trickery, a point succinctly conveyed through the film's visuality. Indeed it is precisely the visuality of the cinema that enables this subtle and performative critique, for the filmic medium is able to succinctly relate the duplicity of her appearance, as Good Shepherd and not Good Shepherd simultaneously, in a way that linear text could not.

Indeed, the indexicality of the photographic medium of the film plays a significant role, in that what is visualized is necessarily, on some level, real. When we see anachronisms, such as the devil's costume and the airplane, we know that they are historically inaccurate, and yet we cannot deny the fact that we are really seeing them nonetheless. The sense of rupture created, as previously suggested, functions to complicate the authority of both the photographic medium and that of the historical narrative as well. This points, then, to the notion that the media of history and photography are analogous in the degree to which they are manipulated yet widely assumed to function as bearers of 'truth'.

Of course casting is also a specifically cinematic process, which also functions both to signify meaning and, in the case of *Simon of the Desert*, to critique the discourse of historiography and its expectations.<sup>16</sup> Sylvia Pinal, in particular, may well be known to Buñuelian audiences as the title character of Buñuel's better known *Viridiana* (1961), in which she plays the role of a young novice who, like Simon, meets her spiritual demise in the course of the film. Our potential recognition of her makes her casting as the devil seem all the more arbitrary and conspicuous, as a conscious choice, perhaps deliberately ironic, made by the author of this historical narrative.<sup>17</sup> More broadly speaking, of course, the casting in this role of a female performer has the ability immediately to complicate the expectations of an audience familiar with Christian imagery portraying the devil as male. It may well have been the conventions of commercial movie-making that influenced this decision, as a glamorous female lead seems almost obligatory across national borders. What may be a potential concession to custom, however, adds a rich dimension in the realm of the dynamics of gender, as Pinal's character might be interpreted alternately as the ultimate *femme fatale*, or as an outcast other, one denied the privileges of (patriarchal) Christianity.

By way of conclusion, I would like to revisit and reframe two points already made. The first involves Buñuel's attraction to the description of the Saint's excrement flowing down the column like wax from a candle. By Buñuel's own accounts, this was the image which made an indelible impression, the one to which his cinematic interpretation of Simon's history may owe its origin. However, Buñuel would alter this very detail. As previously described, in the film Simon informs the peasant goatherd that he excretes dryly, 'much like your goats.' The reason for the deviation, according to Buñuel is quite simply that, 'a man who eats lettuce and only drinks water is like a little bird; he can't possibly excrete very much.' In conjunction with this rationale, he furthermore adds: 'I'm a realistic purist.'<sup>18</sup>



The second moment which warrants revisitation is that of Simon's miracle, when the hands of the peasant man are restored. Though he freely admitted to having been raised within a Catholic tradition, Buñuel made no secret of his loss of faith, devoting, for example, an entire chapter in his autobiography to the theme of his own atheism.<sup>19</sup> And yet this faithless director, who purports to be a 'realistic purist,' has accommodated this unlikely miracle.

What we have here in both instances, then, are moments of contradiction which bear additional implications for Buñuel's historiographic methodology. For the most part, Buñuel's cinematic statement is extremely cynical in virtually every respect. The films seems to attack not only positivist presumptions about truth and progress in history, but also the idealistic spiritual premise upon which Simon has based his life. The two scenes cited above, however, raise tantalizing questions: how could a historian indulge in flagrant anachronisms while claiming to be a 'realistic purist'? How could such a 'realist' endorse supernatural gestures? How could one apparently so critical of 'truth' in history claim to be a stickler for purity?

One potential answer to these questions is that through these very moments, the filmmaker reveals himself doubting his own doubt. Buñuel would repeatedly deny in his writings that he made 'thesis films' which would argue or illustrate a predetermined viewpoint. While on the one hand, this assertion may have been based on a simple desire not to be intolerably didactic or 'preachy', on another level, it may be based on the notion that advancing a 'thesis' implicitly requires certainty of the truth-value of one's own ideas, a notion clearly at odds with the radical critique of positivism that I have argued *Simon of the Desert* represents. This then introduces the paradox of doubt, that doubt itself must be doubted, in the process simultaneously destroying and reinforcing itself. That Buñuel's historiography would embrace such radical doubt is the final point with which I would conclude. Indeed, Buñuel would eloquently articulate this notion when asked whether the film's 'only message could be: "That no one knows."' 'It could be,' he answered, 'but I would cast doubt even on that message.'<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Claudio Brook (Simon) would also appear in *The Young One* and *The Exterminating Angel*, while Silvia Pinal (the devil) starred in *Viridiana* and *The Exterminating Angel*; Jesús Fernández (the goatherd) performed for Buñuel previously in *Nazarín*.

<sup>2</sup> *The Diary of a Chambermaid* (1963) might arguably provide an exception to this rule, as it is set in the 1920s, and in several respects is quite telling of Buñuel's own experiences in France during this time. Its subject matter, however, is derived from the novel by Octave Mirbeau, and is based therefore on fictional, rather than actual historical characters. The same observation might be made about *Nazarín*, which Buñuel set in Mexico in the 1910s, and which was based on a nineteenth-century novel by Spanish writer Benito Pérez-Galdós.

<sup>3</sup> See Robert Rosenstone, ed., *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> These films, discussed in his *Revisioning History*, include: *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1985-7), *Eijanaika* (1981), *From the Pole to the Equator* (1986), *Hitler: A Film From Germany* (1977), *The Home and the World* (1984), *The Moderns* (1988), *The Night of the Shooting Stars* (1983), *Radio Bikini* (1987), *Repentance* (1986), and *Walker* (1987). Films predating widespread discourses of postmodernism include *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959) and *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968).

<sup>5</sup> Buñuel would recount the discovery of Simon in *The Golden Legend* in his memoirs (*My Last Sigh* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), p. 240) and in the interviews collected under the title of *Objects of Desire* (New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1992), p.177.



<sup>6</sup> A closely related exchange would occur in John Huston's filmic adaptation of Flannery O'Connor's novel *Wise Blood* (1979). When the obsessively self-punishing Hazel Motes is encouraged to take up preaching again, he responds, 'I can't preach. I ain't got time.'

<sup>7</sup> Buñuel would acknowledge that this was a departure from the original account which stated that Simon's excrement flowed down the column like wax from a candle. See my concluding remarks for more on this point.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Breton's 'Introduction to the Discourse on the Paucity of Reality,' in *What is Surrealism?*, Franklin Rosemont, ed. (New York: Monad Press, 1978), book II, pp. 16-27.

<sup>9</sup> This is not, however, to overlook the notion that the column also functions to physically separate Simon from the distractions and intrigues of the human realm, a point which becomes significant in other contexts.

<sup>10</sup> *Objects of Desire*, p. 182.

<sup>11</sup> See for example Sumiko Higashi's essay on *Walker and Mississippi Burning* (*Revisioning History*, pp. 188-201).

<sup>12</sup> Visual images of Hell, the Last Judgment, and the Apocalypse would not become standard fare until later Medieval times, notably the Romanesque period of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. I would argue, however, that in the interests of illustrating a point- and knowing full well that the film was not made for a Medieval audience- Buñuel would be willing to allow his viewer to freely conflate early and later Medieval periods.

<sup>13</sup> This is implied by Francis Fukuyama's famed 1989 declaration that the fall of eastern European communism signaled the 'end of history.' See Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1991). With an almost Romantic nostalgia, however, Buñuel himself would remark: "What diabolical times we live in: crowds, smog, promiscuity, radios, etc. I would happily return to the Middle Ages, as long as it was before the Great Plague of the fourteenth century' (*Objects*, p. 178.)

<sup>14</sup> André Breton, 'As in a Wood', in *Free Rein* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 239.

<sup>15</sup> The Good Shepherd was indeed one of the first visual symbols of Christianity, when it was still largely an underground cult in Roman times. The image was painted in catacombs and also appeared in statuette form and on numerous sarcophagi. It is believed to have functioned initially as a surreptitious symbol and not as a portrait of Christ himself.

<sup>16</sup> As Rosenstone has pointed out, casting is necessarily one of the fictions of the history film, in that Liam Nisson, for example, is not in actuality Oskar Schindler.

<sup>17</sup> More specifically *Viridiana* suffers a similar demise in the presence of rock and roll, implying here too that contemporary culture does not necessarily represent the culmination of an ever-improving historical trajectory. With regard to casting, Buñuel's other devil would be played by Pierre Clementi, dressed all in white and holding a flower in a brief appearance in the 1968 film *The Milky Way*.

<sup>18</sup> *Objects of Desire*, p. 177.

<sup>19</sup> *My Last Sigh*, chapter 15, pp. 171-76.

<sup>20</sup> *Objects of Desire*, p. 184. Elsewhere, Buñuel would state: 'I sympathize with those who make an effort to search for the truth; I disagree with those who speak as if they had discovered it' (*Objects of Desire*, p. 129). See the introduction to Thomas McEvilley's *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt* (New York: Allworth Press, 1999) for an expanded discussion on the history of doubt as a worldview.

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