Luis Buñuel's Postmodern *Explicador*: Film, Story and Narrative Space

Gayle Irwin

**RÉSUMÉ**

Les débats concernant le postmodernisme font rage depuis presque un quart de siècle. Certains disent que ce terme surdéterminé ne possède plus la moindre valeur. Mais, lorsqu'on tente de décrire la vaste oeuvre cinématographique de Luis Buñuel, le descripteur de "postmodernisme" garde une indéniable pertinence. Ce texte examine ce que Buñuel peut nous apprendre sur le postmodernisme, mais autant ce que le postmodernisme peut nous apprendre sur le paysage surréaliste. En passant à travers ses œuvres depuis *Un chien andalou* et *L'âge d'or* au *Le phantôme de la liberté* et *Cet obscur objet du désir*, cette étude de *L'explicador* de Luis Buñuel s'engage moins dans le grand débat postmoderne qu'elle ne propose une résistance tranquille à la tendance néo-moderniste de former de grands récits, même là où il est question de terminologie critique. De tous les travaux sur l'œuvre de Buñuel, il y a peu de textes qui ont si consciemment tenté de contextualiser ses films par rapport à l'obsession du 20ᵉ siècle pour un langage du sens.
In the first chapters of Luis Buñuel's autobiography, *Mon dernier soupir*, the famous surrealist film maker describes his earliest encounters with the cinema. One anecdote is worth quoting at length:

In addition to the traditional piano player, each theatre in Saragossa was equipped with its explicador, or narrator, who stood next to the screen and "explained" the action to the audience.

It's hard to imagine today, but when the cinema was in its infancy, it was such a new and unusual narrative form that most spectators had difficulty understanding what was happening. Now we're so used to film language, to both simultaneous and successive action, to flashbacks, that our comprehension is automatic; but in the early years, the public had a hard time deciphering this new pictorial grammar. They needed an explicador to guide them from scene to scene.

I'll never forget, for example, everyone's terror when we saw our first zoom. There on the screen was a head coming closer and closer, growing larger and larger.... All we saw was a head coming toward us, swelling hideously out of proportion. Like Saint Thomas the Apostle, we believed in the reality of what we saw.'

As a film maker Luis Buñuel developed a reputation for subverting not supporting his audiences' belief in the reality of what they saw. He would make use of his Saragossa experience to invent a narrative style that parodied the role of the explicador. His "guide" deliberately disorients viewers.

My argument in this article suggests Buñuel's guide reflects a postmodern approach to the narrative complexities of social critique. Inevitably, this means I will have to engage with the many invested camps now arguing over the definition of "postmodernism", but rather than plunging unthinkingly into the labyrinthine debates surrounding the word (unwilling to risk having my discussion of Buñuel de-railed by the endless vortex of sub-counter-proto-and alter-definitions of the movement), I wish to state at the outset that I prefer to focus on Buñuel's sense of narrative space. In essence, I am proposing that the postmodern, now tarnished by years of academic debate long removed from specific creative and cultural contexts, can be better understood if we return our focus to the micro-narratives the term was coined to describe.

Like the postmodern obsession with indeterminacy, for instance, comprehension of the pictorial grammar in a Buñuel film is rarely automatic and often contradictory. Spectators trying to piece together narrative traces based on cause and effect, time and space, and psychological or ideological patterns are drawn into an undecidable space, a filmic aporia. Irreverently challenging the attempt to locate meaning, Buñuel's films thrive on the tensions of suture and rupture—tensions all the more disconcerting because we are often provided with one when we expect the other. Buñuel's narrator/explicador is incorporated almost randomly into each film text, and he betrays our trust by remaining maddeningly silent when we need him most, or by interrupting and disrupting our expectations when we think we have reached a logical conclusion. As a result, the films speak a language of juxtaposition and metaphor. The spectator is left to fill in the disconcerting, over-determined spaces.

So, to tackle the postmodern question, we might start with a quick overview of the controversies that have led to its over-determined spaces. Postmodernism can and has been divided into two competing if interconnected fields of enquiry. On the one hand, it has been discussed as an aesthetic, or more precisely, an anti-aesthetic—a movement concerned with the artistic ramifications surrounding the technology of meta-narratives as well as the fragmentation of meaning and image, a movement drawn to intertextuality or pastiche. On the other hand, it is seen as a social or philosophical reaction to the age of information (the movement of the feminist postmodern being an example where politics and postmodernist philosophy combine to challenge old structures). In both cases neither the development, the use-value, nor even whether or not the movement exists has been whole-heartedly accepted in some camps. The arguments between Habermas' followers and the proponents of Lyotard over the "post" of postmodern are well documented elsewhere; and not particularly illuminating when it comes to a discussion of specific texts. When one looks at a body of work spanning the so-called rupture between the modern and the postmodern, the debate over chronological development seems all the more spurious. Nevertheless, while it is a little like putting the forest before the trees to focus our energy on terminology as opposed to texts, terms can be useful as a means of grouping and understanding texts.

Which brings me back to the problem of postmodernism and its shifting field. In its many incarnations postmodernism is equipped with a philosophical, a social, a formalistic, and a temporal (anti)esthetic,
each element of which is in turn imprecated in a philosophical, a social, a formalistic and a temporal politics. It is precisely this "shiftiness"—a kind of contemporary transubstantiation that occurs somewhere between the word "postmodern" and the practice of "postmodernism"—that I find most appealing when looking at Buñuel's *explicador*. Where postmodernism has been defined and debated equally on the basis of its being a technique, a philosophy, and an age, so too do Buñuel's films concern themselves with the spacial conventions of accepted prepositional filmic grammar, with the complex and contradictory nature of contemporary reality, and with various strategies for political, personal, and social change. Multiple as opposed to binary, Buñuel's films enact the "neither one thing nor another" that so disturbs our understanding of the postmodern condition. Alternative realities are constantly invading the narrative space of the films. In dreams and down roads, behind doors and through mirrors, Buñuel's montage grammar introduces the inevitability of what psychoanalytical theorists call The Other; yet all the while it seems to question what and where that Other may be. Taking a cue from Buñuel's spacial metaphors, my paper asks: "Who exists in the space between narrative and rupture?" and "Where and what is Luis Buñuel's *explicador*?"

The majority of Buñuel's films are remarkable insofar as they seem to challenge all of the laws of traditional film making. In his first film, *Un Chien andalou* (1928, made in conjunction with Salvador Dalí), the characters appear and dissolve as if the physical reality captured by the camera were as malleable as clay. The "Once Upon A Time" narrative set up in the film's opening immediately breaks down into a series of shocking and disruptive shots, only sketchily related. Because the film consists of a string of hyper-symbolic realities and dreamscapes, it was quickly accepted as a surrealist masterpiece. The film moves stealthily from images of pubic hair, to seaurchins, and severed hands.

With his first collaborative film effort, therefore, Buñuel established a film-scape that parodies the physical laws of time and space. In one scene, the male protagonist looks up from his position in bed to find that the person behind a door who had been demanding entry to the room was actually himself. He faces himself as Other. The space and time continuum audiences have come to understand as part of a film's unique grammar is completely dissolved by this split character. Here is not a simple dream, or even a flashback. As a machine used to record instances, Buñuel's camera picks up on the split identity of every film object. The man on screen is both the sexually confused protagonist we have been following, and the sexually aggressive character that confronts him. He can be both because the image we see in either case is only a re-presentation of a particular moment in time. It is a celluloid a(i)llusion.

From his first film on, Buñuel's meta-narratives reflect the rupture identified by J.F. Lyotard as the mark of the postmodern era. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard writes: "A self does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before. Young or old, man or woman, rich or poor, a person is always located at "nodal points" of specific communications circuits.... Or better: one is always located at the post through which various kinds of messages pass." Try as we might, we can never simply follow the "story" in *Un Chien andalou* without acknowledging the evidence of its "artificial" construction, the many posts through which messages pass. With narrative titles standing in for the *explicador*, we are even more disoriented. From the familiar "ONCE UPON A TIME" to "SIXTEEN YEARS LATER" to "IN SPRING," we never know quite how to position ourselves regarding the next frame.

According to Jacques Lacan, the speaking subject identifies his or her independent nature through the tensions arising from desire and lack. Many critics have begun to see the connection between the experience of a Buñuel film and Lacan's principles of Self and Other. When Paul Sandro discusses the relationship between the desiring subject and the disruptive patterns of *Un Chien andalou*, he writes:

A certain thematic pattern finally begins to emerge in the interplay of spacial disturbances, one that comments on the nature of desire. The space of desire is the space of movement, of a passage, from self-possession to a state of self-loss (in erotic fusion) and back again. At a hypothetical moment, the self is in some sense outside itself...in a state of crisis with the other that it seeks to possess. The self seeks to possess the other absolutely, but it cannot because the other, as object of desire, is a metaphor for the self's own lack-in-being.... [T]he movement of desire in its displacement from object to object, from metaphor to metaphoric, is metonymic.

Sandro's analysis of desire in Buñuel's films draws upon the division between Self and Other as it is reflected in Lacan's mirror stage. By and large, Sandro's study finds that desire is a major thematic and
metonymic principle guiding the Buñuel vision. Desire, it would seem, is Buñuel's allegorical explicador. But, as Sandro admits, desire is not so much a noun, a 'lack' (definable and static for all its "absent presence"), as it is a verb, a movement (active and unstable, a yearning able to act upon meaning as much as it is defined by meaning). The distinction I want to draw between noun and verb in this case is based on a postmodern consciousness. In his discussion of the emerging postmodern "social bond", Lyotard suggests that a common consciousness or institutional substructure is not what holds society together; rather, we face what Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson describe as "a weave of crisscrossing threads of discursive practices," where no single thread runs continuously throughout the whole.  

Thus our protagonist can shoot his sexually aggressive Other Self in Un Chien andalou. When his doppelganger is relegated to the corner of the room, like a school boy, he is armed with books which mysteriously turn into pistols, and he is able to commit a suicide of sorts. Within psychoanalytic theory this could be seen as the death drive of the character's desire perhaps; but even his own self-annihilation is unstable and active. As the nemesis figure falls to the floor, the filmic space is transformed and we watch him fall into a pastoral wooded world equipped with its own impassive, half-clothed female Object of Desire. Collapsing, the man reaches out to the naked torso as if it could prop him up, but his Object of Desire is again displaced. The death drive of the suicide is forever deferred.  

Meanwhile, for the audience, an extra-metonymic pattern emerges. Our own desire for story is being assaulted. The subject of our interest, the fallen protagonist, is unceremoniously carried off by a gaggle of very respectable looking strollers, and we are carried into a new series of shots, with a new focus of interest.  

Whether it be a metonymic principle within the film's story, or an extra-textual, metaphoric principle affecting the idea of art as process, the relationship between Self and Other is constantly mutating and transforming in Buñuel's films. The relationship is, in essence, postmodern. On the one hand, characters act out and are thrown into an angst of shifting desires and subject positions, while, on the other hand, the films initiate complimentary desires and unstable subject positions for the audience—most especially the desire for story, or the desire to possess and understand the story of the Other (which, as it turns out, seems the story of the Self-as-Other—like Un Chien andalou's protagonist-alter-ego.)

While currently undergoing a flurry of self-analysis, theories of postmodernism are generally most interested in the desire for story, history, or meaning, and how that desire (as in Buñuel's films) inevitably leads to rupture. Postmodernism "opens itself to the randomness and contingency of unmediated experience," writes one critic.  

Story, and history, and meaning are fragmented, never quite decidable. Linda Hutcheon identifies the conjuncture where "documentary historical actuality meets formalist self-reflexivity and parody" as being the venue of the postmodern project. This is where "a study of representation becomes, not a study of mimetic mirroring or subjective projecting, but an exploration of the way in which narratives and images structure how we see ourselves and how we construct our notions of self, in the present and in the past."  

Because many of his films incorporate this postmodern agenda, our search for meaning within Buñuel's repertoire can never adequately answer all of our questions. Ultimately, there is no private meaning that will satisfactorily capture the complexity of the films. On the contrary, the communal experience Buñuel seems to have implied in his famous "plea to go out and commit murder" speech fits perfectly within the postmodern movement's vision of art, meaning, and history—at least at a time when the postmodern was tied to the culture it described, and critical interest extended to the discursive relationship between "art" and "reality."  

Often working within the framework of a post-structuralist Lacanian view of Self and Other, the first postmodern theorists explored the nature of individual experience within the many, often contradictory, narratives offered in contemporary society. Stanley Trachtenberg suggests that postmodernism sees experience as dissociative or fragmented rather than holistic or unified.... Unlike Modernism, where the work of art was a closed entity whose meanings were fixed and central and which encouraged explication or decipherment, postmodernism is dispersed. It invites collaboration. Thus it reflects a movement from symbolic representation, which proclaims the absence of what is there, to signification, which indicates the presence of an object. Where modernism cultivated ambiguity, postmodernism makes fun of it, exposing the framework that supports meaning. The work is thus pointed toward historical conditions rather than private meaning.
Buñuel's films demand a collaborative effort from their audience. The gaps and ruptures are not so much pockets of ambiguity awaiting explanation, as they are invitations to story.

Take the case of one of Buñuel's finest films, *The Phantom of Liberty* (1974). In its broadest form *The Phantom of Liberty* revolves around differing always invested narrative patterns. It explores how the subject (as in subject-matter, and subject-self) is tied to and shaped by expectations of story or discourse. Like John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Buñuel's film sets up a multiple narrative framework. It opens with a scene reenacting a Goya painting, and begins to unravel traces of history and historical documentation. Meanwhile, it weaves a network of individual fantasies and appropriated religious and societal taboos into an amusing, complex configuration. We are never quite sure what will capture the attention of Buñuel's camera, but, as the various scenes are pieced together, they begin to reflect upon one another.

The juxtaposition between shots and scenes sets up a tension within the audience: the desire to make sense of such diverse, seemingly random sequences in one film. What is more, that desire reflects a process; it courts our complicity in wanting yet one more narrative. The need for story is communal, and it undermines at the same time as it creates the fiction of individual liberty. The individual is displaced and effaced by the structures of language and the rule of what Lacan calls the Symbolic Law, so our desire to follow the various threads in Buñuel's *The Phantom of Liberty* positions the same processes that construct the narratives of history. Our desire is an attempt to position ourselves within the context of this particular film, to find our subject position within someone else's discourse. We are searching for an explicador.

But our desire, like the protagonists' of *Un Chien andalou*, is forever displaced in the Buñuel film. The subject position is denied stability throughout *The Phantom of Liberty*. In the diegesis itself none of the characters are interesting as individuals. This film neither presents us with a protagonist, a person in the form of a traditional hero, nor a point of view in the tradition of narrative epics. Instead it seems to call attention to each character's, and each developing narrative's, utter expendability. The dual myths of individuality and of capital-T-Truth are themselves under attack.

A meta-filmmic principle, the chaotically weaving story of *The Phantom of Liberty* consistently reminds us how, as a projected celluloid representation of an actor playing a character, the individual on the screen is an absent presence at best. (Buñuel's use of two different actresses to play one role in *That Obscure Object of Desire* is an example of just how expendable the character can be—especially, one is tempted to add, when we are talking about the traditional role that female characters have played as objects of desire over the decades.) The different groups of people in *The Phantom of Liberty* are completely contextualized by their film-world. They have no history that is separate from the social history depicted in the reading of anathemas, or the policing of the law. Finally, even the animals and the various symbolic figures of one man's dream are found in a zoo by the end of the film. They are closed-in and appropriated by the goals of society. Individual liberty, the cornerstone of the French and American revolutions, is shown to be a phantom, a deconstructable concept, a delusion of liberty.

Furthermore, with its shifting focus, *The Phantom of Liberty* questions the authoritarian rule of society's constructed reality and justice—an authoritarian rule often camouflaged as Truth. When a seemingly straightforward, average middle-class family takes the system at its word after their daughter is reported missing, we are brought face to face with their absurdity. Dragging the obviously present child with them, they obediently go through all the correct procedures and proper channels in order to report her absence and have her "found". The daughter's "presence"—her reality even to her parents—is just another social construct. The scene makes little sense metonymically, while metaphorically it seems to challenge the nature of society's institutionalized discourse. (The child, as it happens, is first reported missing when she fails to respond to the role call at school. Unless she participates in their system—unless she speaks their language—she has no identity in this society.) The ruptures in *The Phantom of Liberty* suggest a two-fold opening: the fiction of individuality is deconstructed, and the authority of narrative is challenged.

The threat to individual desire, together with the political connections of society's constructed narratives, provide a major concern in many Buñuel films. In *Land Without Bread* (1932), a film often mistaken for a straightforward documentary, Buñuel incorporates a narrator whose melodramatic distance from the misery of the people of Las Hurdes proves disquieting. As the voice patronizingly provides "meaning" for each of the scenes, and as the music from Brahms's Fourth Symphony registers in the background of the desolate community, we sense the discordance of the film as a combination of image and story. The images and the narrative co-exist uneasily, creating for the documentary genre the same diachronic tension so familiar to Buñuel's other films. The artistic enterprise of *Land Without Bread* is never
allowed to hide from its own agenda. In one instance the camera unconsciously records the rifle shot that picks off a mountain goat which, according to the narrator, “lost its footing” on a slope; or, in another shot, a child is forced to submit herself to the dispassionate examination of the camera’s eye just days, we are told, before she too dies.

The narrative of Land Without Bread is increasingly betrayed by inconsistencies. A people who took bread from their starving children because they did not know what it was, suddenly are faced with a shortage of bread as they wander the forlorn countryside in search of work. More and more, we become aware of the fictional construction at the heart of the documentary form. A scientific essay on the mosquito provides just one more example of how far removed the film evidence of this impoverished community is from the reality of the people it attempts to capture. “Aggressive,” “hostile” groups like the “idiots” are appropriated and named according to the shared Western, bourgeois cultural values of the documentary film-maker and his typical audience. The film almost becomes a parody of standard documentary practice. It records the narrative patterns and the hidden agendas built into documentary film language.

In contrast, then, to the “familiar film grammar” we have all become accustomed to—the grammar which Buñuel refers to in his autobiography—many of these films either parody narrative roles, as in Land Without Bread, or incorporate multiple often contradictory narrative perspectives. The possibility of the Other (an/other subject, an/other story, an/other voice, an/other perspective) lurks in the gaps and ruptures which derail the narratives of films like Un Chien andalou, Land Without Bread, and The Phantom of Liberty. The narrative space of a Buñuel film continuously shifts as he provides a montage grammar that paradoxically points out how things fit together, and how they cannot fit together. Nowhere is this paradox more apparent than in the controversial L'Age d'or (1930).

L’Age d’or, Buñuel’s second major film, opens with a series of seemingly random shots. A pseudo documentary on scorpions is followed by the title “SOME HOURS AFTERWARD,” which in turn is followed by the shot of a sea-side terrain that discovers a bedraggled thief who patrols the area. As the thief spies upon a group of religious figures, the tale of the film opens. The traditional use of the shot-counter-shot suture to show us what the thief is watching signals the beginning of the story. While perhaps disorienting when set against the scientific style of the first minutes, the montage shot-counter-shot suture of thief and bishops provides a recognizable narrative perspective. Only in retrospect does the parallel between the scorpions and the unfolding story become apparent. Like the scorpion’s tail, this tale of the Late Golden Age of Christianity harbours a sting in its final joint. But first we must witness how versatile and how mesmerizing the tail/tale’s movement can be.

As with The Phantom of Liberty, the traditional narrative space of L'Age d’or is connected by extra-metonymic forces that have more to do with fragmentation of story, than with a recognisable diegesis. The shift from lyrical shots, to violence, to farce is hypnotic. Again we are witnessing the surrealism of the filmic process.14 Of all the creative media available to the surrealists, film may have provided the strongest subversive capabilities. Having learned film language, cinema viewers, perhaps more than any other audience, accept the illusion of what they see.

What they see in L’Age d’or, on the other hand, is more elusive than illusion, both surprising and confusing. Just before the camera transports our interest to the founding of “Imperial” Rome, the bishops of the opening sea-side scene turn into corpses with a single spliced shot. Next, the narrative which had provided us with the subject position of the thief is unceremoniously abandoned, just like the scorpion piece. Even more confusing still: according to the titles that connect the following scenes, the Rome founded in honour of the bishops predates Christianity, and it comes complete with automobiles and seductive billboards.15 Buñuel chooses to combine the sound track of this film with a series of narrative titles, both of which serve to disrupt the narrative frame and create an elusive, multi-facetted explicador. Two scenes in particular indicate the subversiveness of the narrative patterns of L’Age d’or. One is the much discussed mirror scene where Lya Lys and her lover seem to communicate through a Lewis Carroll-like looking glass; the other is the final joint in the tale when Buñuel incorporates scenes from the Marquis de Sade’s novel 120 Journées de Sodome.

All of the recent critical interest in Lacan and the parallel between his mirror stage and the artistic enterprise has resulted in many valuable readings of the mirror scene in L’Age d’or. The scene itself consists of a series of shots combined through a spill-over (what Jacques Derrida would refer to as débordement) in the sound track. Linda Williams concludes her reading of the scene with an analysis of the mysterious wind generated by the mirror:
The sound of the wind mixes with that of the dog bark and the cowbell. The next shot is a close-up of the mirror alone. But instead of Lys’s reflection, we see clouds racing across the wind-blown sky. Yet, at the bottom of he mirror, the glass vials of the dressing table on which the mirror sits are also reflected. In other words, the mirror reflects both Lys’s room and a place far away associated with neither Lys nor Modot, but whose sound mingles with both their sounds...suggesting the potential space of their union, a union...suggested by a narcissistic image. For what Lys seeks in her mirror is ultimately to possess herself in the image and the place of another... This false mirror is her private movie screen and, like most movie screens, it offers an escape to another world that is really a way of possessing oneself as another in the elsewhere of another world. The reference to a movie screen, here, is telling. In addition to the metonymic principle implied by Lys’ desire for another world where she and her lover could be united, the mirror becomes a metaphor for the story-making processes of the film. It reflects the vial and the other-world of Lys’ communal association with Modot. By mingles the dog’s bark, the cow bell, and the wind, the sky-reflecting mirror gives the audience a glimpse of the transformative powers of image and sound in cinema. In psychoanalytic terms, the displacement of physical laws harkens back to a pre-Symbolic state where the Imaginary rules. Buñuel’s mirror momentarily releases both Lys and the audience from the tyranny of the division between Self and Other. The constructed and contradictory nature of identity, together with the division between Self and Other in this film, can easily be compared to both postmodernist meta-discourse and Lacanian post-structuralist philosophy.

Lys’ magic mirror has an esoteric angle of incidence, both nostalgically leaning towards its conventional fairytale prototype, and refusing to reflect the archaic notion that reality and dream cannot exist on the same plain. Thus, through Buñuel’s looking glass, the spacial dimensions of traditional story enter a meta-fictional realm where the Imaginary is granted a certain amount of free association. Lys and her lover seem desperate enough to be able to communicate through the pre-Symbolic realm of the mirror world; but, like so many similar attempts in other Buñuel films, their connection is only fleeting. During this remarkable meta-filmic leap of space, Modot is pulled back from the communal experience by two figures representing Symbolic Law and the structures of society. Modot and Lys cannot completely escape the bond of legally sanctioned story and the association with metonymic meaning. Modot, for example, must provide written evidence ratifying the society’s approval of his conduct in order to escape.

Eventually, after more scenes which allude with Lys giving in to her filth and with Gaston venting his disgust peculiar objects belonging to others, Modot is pulled back from the communal life of Lys’ communal association with Modot.

Still resisting closure, at the moment apart and the feathers begin to fall, Buñuel includes a series of titles as an ironic and transition. Traditionally the titles should direct our reading of the next scene, but from the start Buñuel’s explicador, frustrates our expectations. It deconstructs at the same time as it creates the sense of spacial connection: “AT THE EXACT MOMENT WHEN THESE FEATHERS, TORN OUT BY HIS FURIOUS HANDS, COVERED THE GROUND BELOW THE WINDOW,” the titles inform us, “AT THAT MOMENT, AS WE SAID, BUT VERY FAR AWAY, THE SURVIVORS OF THE CHATEAU DE SELINNY WERE COMING OUT, TO GO BACK TO PARIS.” What follows is a prime example of how closely Buñuel’s film narrative resembles the issues surrounding postmodernism some sixty years later. This is how it appears in Buñuel’s transcript:

[Cut back to the big close-up of the feathers.] FOUR WELL KNOWN AND UTTER SCOUNDRELS HAD LOCKED THEMSELVES UP IN AN IMPREGNABLE CASTLE FOR ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY DAYS TO CELEBRATE THE MOST BRUTAL OF ORGIES. THESE FRIENDS HAD NO LAW BUT THEIR OWN DEPRAVITY [original screenplay had title: “THE FEATHERS GO ON FALLING”]. THEY WERE LIBERTINES WHO HAD NO GOD, NO PRINCIPLES, AND NO RELIGION. THE LEAST CRIMINAL AMONG THEM WAS DEFILED BY MORE EVIL THAN YOU COULD NAME. IN HIS EYES THE LIFE OF A WOMAN—WHAT AM I SAYING, OF ONE WOMAN, OF ALL THE WOMEN IN THE WORLD—COUNTS FOR AS LITTLE AS A FLY’S. THEY TOOK WITH THEM INTO THE CHATEAU, SOLELY FOR THEIR DISGUSTING DESIGN, EIGHT MARVELLOUS GIRLS, EIGHT SPLENDID ADOLESCENTS. AND SO THAT THEIR IMAGINATION (ALREADY TOO JADED) SHOULD BE CONTINUALLY STIMULATED, THEY ALSO TOOK ALONG FOUR DEPRAVED WOMEN WHO CONSTANTLY FIRED THE EVIL LUST OF THE FOUR MONSTERS BY THEIR TALES.1

One of the first things that becomes apparent when watching the film is how, despite the titles, the feathers never in fact reach the ground in that first cut-back. Whereas the incorporated explicador obliquely tells us what is happening with the feathers, we can see that he is
anticipating, and therefore not quite right. We could compare what is happening in the space and time references reflected by the forever falling, never fallen feathers, with Stephen Heath's theory of narrative space in film: "The 'just-before' in film is spatially moving, the itinerary of a fixity perpetually gained, and the frame stands—acts—in relation to that." 16

Many of Buñuel's most complex and ruptured narratives do not necessarily dissolve meaning so much as they open their own dialogue on film as a medium. Meta-filmic, the space/time continuum of this particular scene parallels the dual goals of the postmodern project of self-consciousness, and fragmentation or uncertainty. As a result of these dual goals, the nature of "communal meaning" (as in socially constructed meaning, not innocent, but designed) becomes more and more important. Narrative is never straightforward. Witness the confusing tone of the titles: there is something unsettling about the explicador-narrator's description of the women who are raped and murdered. Does he relish in the fate of the "eight marvellous girls," the "splendid adolescents"? And who is the "I" of the "What am I saying?" anyway? This unusually long series of titles initiates any number of questions. Why, for instance, do the men need the tales of the depraved women to fire their lagging desires? What are those tales? As promised by the opening of this film, we have come to the sting of L’Age d’or—the scorpion tale—a metaphoric invitation to go out and commit murder. Throughout the film we have witnessed the attempt to follow and create a story separate from the symbolic rule and repressive order of society. As the attempts finally break down (fragmented and scattered like the feathers from Modot's pillow), we are left with two seemingly irreconcilable discourses.

Buñuel's Duke emerges from the cave-castle looking and acting very much like Christ. On the one hand, therefore, the titles together with our interpretation of the final victim's scream draw us to the connection between this series of shots and the infamous Marquis de Sade. On the other hand, the images, sans narration and sound, echo traditional, immediately recognisable icons from the Christian myth. Finally, with the last dissolve focussing on the scalps of female victims, the two stories meld into another unwritten story: the silencing and inevitable misogyny of both the Patriarchal libertine and the Christian possibilities. Narrative connections are drawn through a series of question marks and absences.

Perhaps the most potent silence in this early sound film occurs in this de Sade scene just before the last woman is (we assume) murdered. As Buñuel wrote in his script:

"The duke of Blangis slowly recrosses the drawbridge, picks up the girl tenderly, and assists her back into the castle. There is a close-up of the drawbridge chain and the open castle door. For a brief while, nothing happens. Then we hear a terrible shriek coming from inside the castle. After a few seconds, the same character, impassive, comes out to join the others." 17

While this film closes with the violence of a look-alike Christ, that violence takes place off-screen, alluded to through a wordless scream, just beyond our desire for story.

Increasingly, the Buñuel enterprise resembles the many descriptions that have attempted to define postmodernism. Speaking of the mythical Orphic pact between language and the body, Ihab Hassan provides the following analysis of the complex historical development leading to the postmodern imagination:

First, Romantic dream and metaphor explode words into outrageous visions. From Novalis and Nerval, through Lautreamont and Rimbaud, to the Surrealists of our century, the imagination strains toward a kind of Dionysian frenzy. Second, Romantic irony, taking a parallel line through Heine and Mallarme, moves imagination toward its abolition, and persuades art of its impossibility; we look toward Beckett. The language of the former, merging with the chaotic flux of reality, aspires to all; the language of the second, cancelling reality..., aspires to Nothing. The two languages, taken far enough, dissolve the Orphic pact between word and flesh. 18

The pact between flesh and word is dissolved by the end of L’Age d’or. The juxtaposition between the Christ image and the titles, and the implied violence and the scream, all speak of rupture and displacement. Lys and Modot have strained against the symbolic order in what could very well be described as a Dionysian frenzy, but they have failed, and we are left with a Beckett-like cancellation. 19 This cancellation, however, does not prohibit "any and all" discourse, because we are also left with our desire. The desire for story is important to L’Age d’or, and that desire, like the desire of the young marginalized couple, works both with and against the space/time continuum imposed by centuries of historical and authoritarian definitions of formal realism.
Over the years Buñuel’s repertoire of films will return again and again to the question of narrative, and the desire for story. After his first experiments with surrealist film-making, he never ceases to challenge the narrative processes inherent to film. Narration is a mapping, and, among other things, Buñuel’s films are like a map of the postmodern. While it is impossible to deal with each of Buñuel’s films in the space of a single article, my discussion of Buñuel applies equally to his most mature work. Tied together loosely by the trickster-figure of his explicador, Buñuel’s films map out the possibility of social critique within a fragmented network of competing narratives, including (and most specifically) the narratological and spectatorial space of film. Thus, both the desolate road in Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie (1972) and the busy highway that opens The Milky Way (1969) seem to parallel the patterns of narration within the diegesis of these two films. The six characters of Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie find themselves periodically transported onto a dusty, endless stretch of road, forever searching for their next meal, never quite finding satisfaction. The image of the road comments extra-metonymically upon the aimlessness of their lives and the story that has captured them. Their dinner-party goal is consistently derailed. Their story never ends with the anticipated meal-conclusion, and, finally, the scene that discovers them upon a theatrical stage also implicates the film audience in their frustration. Our gaze, intimately complicit in the camera’s function, directs and imprisons their story. There is a hand at work framing “the possible” in the lives of all filmic characters; the characters within the plot, as the dusty road of this film suggests, have no life outside of the designs of the “already written.”

Roads, as paths of narration, seldom lead to enlightenment in Buñuel. Expectations of story, like destinations, are rarely achieved. In contrast to the barren, Beckett-like stretch of road in Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie, for instance, the long shot that opens The Milky Way discovers a busy multi-laned highway, with a steady flow of one way traffic. The shot and its familiar nature creates an expectation of a new kind of story—fast moving, like the cars, modern, and goal-oriented or single-minded. As the opening credits are printed over the image, however, our expectations are immediately assaulted. The homogeneous flow of traffic is subtly tampered with at first. Automobiles from earlier eras displace the mid-sixties models, and the odd military vehicle invades the scene. The original narrative space is destabilized, until, finally, the road is transformed almost mystically, and the camera zooms in on two pilgrim travellers.

Like the displaced shot of the aimlessly plodding characters from Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie, The Milky Way’s narrative patterns are reflected in the transforming road. Buñuel re-works the history of heresy and religious theology in this film named after our galaxy. It is a film about naming and fitting. As the road dissolves into something completely isolated from the busy goals of contemporary society, the pilgrims appear and are met by a black-cloaked figure who pronounces inverted parables, and who is accompanied by a magician child. The long scene that had started with a road which seemed to promise a specific type of recognizable story, thereby ends with a magical, quasi-allegorical encounter and a series of questions.

This film, like The Phantom of Liberty, jumps from one story to the next as if unity of plot and consistency of idea were uninteresting, superfluous theories. After their encounter with the enigmatic anti-prophet, the pilgrims continue along the road hoping for a ride, and they try to fit their experience into the realm of everyday reality. During their conversation, the subject of beards triggers the older man’s memory of his mother’s advice on the matter. When the scene dissolves into a flashback, the memory, caught up in a metaphoric tension with the moment in which it is “re-membered,” acquires the religious overtones of the pilgrim’s recent encounter. The man’s mother looks very much like the Madonna in the flashback, and the man himself is dressed in the robes of traditional Jewish garb during the time of Christ. Moreover, when the camera cuts back to the travellers, the pilgrims meet a boy with three wounds, echoing the wounds of the crucified Christ, and the boy proceeds to stop a car, leaning back and relaxing in more familiar confines, one man mummers “Mon Deu” three times and abruptly the sequence ends as the car stops and they are expelled from “paradise” for their blasphemy. Turning away from the travellers, the film now cuts to a darkened restaurant and it focuses on two new, seemingly unconnected figures.

The “code” of the familiar freeway shot that began The Milky Way is by now completely deconstructed. As stories trace metaphorically and symbolically connected paths, and only coincidentally run into each other, the road’s original goal-oriented and pragmatic directionism gives way to the wandering paths that are integral to Buñuel’s disturbing narrativization. The unconventional story-line in The Milky Way, parallels...
the religious heresies it uncovers; both are heresies, and both are transgressions in the Derridian sense of the world.

The contemporary pilgrimage of *The Milky Way* is postmodern. (According to Linda Hutcheon, the postmodern artist uses self-consciousness—of story as story, or film as film—as a means to engage the social and historical world.) Fragmentation and paradoxical connections draw the narrative patterns of this and other Buñuel films into a complex, dynamic network. The stories spin off each other into questions of authority and authorized narrative discourse. Buñuel's explicador does not provide us with an easy story, nor with easy answers. Such answers betray social and historical difficulties—the mesh of contending hopes and practices that produce meaning.

So what, finally, is Buñuel's metaphorical explicador? At the end of *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977), Buñuel's final film, the love story of the two protagonists explodes in a remarkable image of wordlessness. Is this an affirmation or an indictment of postmodernism's ability to provide a stable foundation from which to promote personal, political, and/or social change? Like the debate surrounding the politics of postmodernism, there perhaps can be no final word on Buñuel's explicador since its field of enquiry shifts between politics and style, between being, and telling, and doing. Buñuel's narratives are about desire, and like the Lacanian understanding of desire, they have more in common with the grammar of verbs than nouns. They are active and dynamic, a process. What is more, each audience provides a link integral to what is essentially the postmodern give-and-take of meaning; as the Other on which the films depend, each audience is part of Buñuel's explicador. Our own critical perception and/or commentary on the relationship between shots and scenes adds to the film score. Keeping this in mind, we can look at the final scene of Buñuel's final film from at least two angles: at the same time as it ends the bizarre sadomasochistic relationship between the characters on the screen, the explosion in *That Obscure Object of Desire* denies closure and invites discourse. The political, for postmodernism as for Buñuel, begins with the invitation to story.

"The impulse to situate is important and postmodern," writes Linda Hutcheon. For this reason, if no other, an examination of Buñuel's films within contemporary postmodern debates may be providential at a time when the argument surrounding postmodernism has become increasingly concerned with the vaguer within academic terminology. With each film Buñuel explores the impulse to situate. The scientific expose of the scorpion in *L'Age d'Or*, and the cloud-cut moon of *Un Chien andalou*, the Goya painting in *The Phantom of Liberty*, the travel film style opening of *Land Without Bread*, and the freeway shot from *The Milky Way*, all provide recognizable and immediate narrative patterns. They invite us to situate ourselves within a traditional, comfortable film genre. But in a typically postmodern gesture, as soon as we feel comfortable, Buñuel breaks the pattern. Together, multiple perspectives and a self-deconstrucitng filmic grammar create a narrative space that is consistently reaching outward, situating. "Neither one thing nor another", Buñuel's explicador, like the final explosion of *That Obscure Object of Desire*, takes place in the space between the contradictions of *Self and Other.* The result is an aporetic space where the impossible reigns as paradox—a filmic equivalent to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. Ultimately, Buñuel's explicador is that paradox, and that paradox is the postmodern.

NOTES

7. Even the complex, step-by-step structural breakdown of films like *Un chien andalou* and *The Phantom of Liberty* cannot fully cover the experience of the films themselves. While they trace how the films are composed, they do not account for the possible reasons why the structural patterns work the way they do, or how those patterns affect a given audience. Witness the
differing readings of the infamous eye-slicing sequence from psychoanalytic, feminist, and structuralist perspectives.


10. Paul Sandro points out how the diegesis of this film paradoxically sets some characters free of the authority of narrative, while enslaving others. The tension between those who are freed (like the poet-killer) and those enslaved (like the little "lost" girl), establishes the crises built into the desire for story. (Diversions of Pleasure, 120)

11. According to J.H. Matthews, Buñuel "provokes us to revolt against our passivity as mere onlookers" with this discordance. J.H. Matthews, *Surrealism and Film* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1971), 111. But Matthews seems to suggest that the combination of image and story and music points to stasis, a form of moral instruction not unlike Brecht. I believe, on the other hand, that the discordant threads instead reflect the problematics of interpretation itself, and the discourses of power as they have been identified by Michel Foucault.

12. Philippe Soupault, who would later become a member of the Surrealist group in Paris, enthusiastically pointed out cinema's value for the Dada enterprise in 1918: "its strength is impressive since it reverses natural laws: it ignores space and time, upsets gravity, ballistics, biology..." (as quoted in Matthews, 52). Further, Linda Williams writes: "The Surrealists' interest in film arose not from the power of motion photography to create the illusion of diegetic time and space, but from the power of the image to structure this time and space into radically different forms." Linda Williams, *Figures of Desire: A Theory and Analysis of Surrealist Film* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 143.

13. The anachronistic ruptures and splices in the film are postmodern. According to James Collins, "[T]he polylogic relationship with the 'already said' is not preservationist [in the postmodern film] but explicitly archeological in its attempt to discover relationships among the layers of accumulated representations." James Collins, "Postmodernism and Cultural Practice: Redefining the Parameters." *Screen* vol. 28 no.2 (Spring 1987): 22. Buñuel's intriguing choice to trace the displacement of desire through the archeological ruins of a dominant civilization (Rome) and a dominant religion (Christianity) is particularly interesting in this context.


17. Luis Buñuel, L'Age d'or, 71.


19. In his article in *Screen*, James Collins suggests that the tendency to reject discourse is modernist and results in a zero-sum game. ("Postmodernism and Cultural Practice: Redefining the Parameters," 22.) He goes on however, to discuss how the postmodern text recognises that the representational discourse of past texts "cannot be conjured away by a sudden rupture because it forms the very fabric of our 'structures of being.'" The postmodern text sets up a relationship with the voices of the past; it rejects their autonomous position as artistic artifact, and incorporates their history into the contemporary construct. Thus, while rejecting the Christian myth by stitching its icons together in a relationship with the de Sade violence of repressed desires, Buñuel's L'Age d'or also acknowledges the story's influence. We cannot follow the horror of the de Sade narrative "outside" the ubiquitous network of Judeo-Christian values that permeate his society. As always, the distinction between the modernist and the post-modernist project is difficult to define, and much of the problem is wrapped up in the chronological relationship implied by the term itself. If L'Age d'or can in fact be called postmodern, the current debate about the use-value over the term "postmodern" as a description of a contemporary artistic movement is inevitable.

20. The explosion in this film occurs in the wake of an announcement that the terrorists from the far Left and the far Right have chosen to join forces.

Gayle Irwin is presently completing a Ph. D. at York University. Her work focuses on the interlocking questions of feminism, postmodernism and cultural studies.