LAS HURDES AND THE POLITICAL EFFICACY OF THE GROTESQUE

Résumé: Se basant sur les théories du grotesque, cet article dement l'hypothèse qu'une sensibilité colonialiste a influencé le portrait que Buñuel trace des Hurdanos dans Las Hurdes. Une lecture attentive du film démontre que Buñuel a utilisé le grotesque pour mettre en evidence la condition des Hurdanos, pour questionner les conventions du documentaire ethnographique et pour désabiliser les représentations stéréotypées et souvent dégradantes de "l'Autre.”

In a recent essay Nicholas Thomas argues that Luis Buñuel's Las Hurdes (Spain, 1932) is both "relentlessly denigrating" and "distinctly colonialist in its reduction of a hinterland people to the status of freak show exhibits for the Parisian avant-garde." Thomas is, of course, not the first to find Las Hurdes an exceedingly disturbing experience. Three separate Spanish governments banned it according to Buñuel's biographer, and a well known scholar of Buñuel's acquaintance asked him, "Why don't you show something nice, like folk dancing?" Buñuel even claims that the Spanish Civil Guard considered him "notoriously debauched" and Las Hurdes "a crime against the state." One can only imagine the immense pleasure that all of this gave him.

In this reexamination of Las Hurdes I plan to look at the film in light of Thomas' comments, to discuss it in terms of theories of spectatorship and of the grotesque, and finally, to disagree with Thomas' indictment of it. One of Thomas' major objections to Las Hurdes is that through its modernist, surrealist mode of narration it privileges shock tactics and rhetoric over meaning and morality. He argues that, "The work of excising cultural matter for the purposes of collage implies that one's interest is in the product rather than the sources, which in this case means that the rhetorical shock is valued over the meanings that might be attached to statements and representations by their speakers or makers." Citing a few specific images from Las Hurdes, like the wedding celebration and the dying child, Thomas considers Buñuel's film to be "nothing other than sophisticated urban dwellers' familiar contempt for rural peoples" expressed in the most condescending and shocking manner imaginable. Although Thomas holds a tenable position given the complexity and ambiguity of the film, his lack of close reading of Las Hurdes tends to make his argument less persuasive. Nevertheless, it is well to note at the beginning that Buñuel's use of the grotesque in this film can lead to various sorts of interpretations because of the ambivalent nature of the grotesque itself.

To begin with, Buñuel has at least three serious targets in Las Hurdes: the social system and mythologies which allow the Hurdanos to live in such poverty, the ethnographic documentary as a way of knowing "the Other," and the complacent "bourgeois" spectator who is comfortable in the superior and distanced position granted by popular ethnographic documentaries like Nanook of the North (USA, 1922, Robert Flaherty). Much of Buñuel's strong rhetoric, which is part of his surrealist, avant-garde practice, is drawn from an aesthetic category known as the grotesque. The grotesque has a long history in art and literature as a tool for generating satire, upsetting spectators and subverting classical texts. For Buñuel, the grotesque is not merely a rhetorical shock tactic or a cheeky exploitation of titillating material. Its sometimes hilarious, frequently unsettling, but ultimately revealing representation of "the Other" is the Surrealist's subversion of the staid and serious business of ethnography, as well as an attack on his culture's detachment from, or disavowal of, the real bodies of the poor.

In traditional works on aesthetics, theoreticians discuss art under a number of headings. Those which seem to have had particular relevance for theories of spectatorship are experiences like beauty, pleasure and distance. On the surface grotesque images can only be made to fit these qualities with difficulty, yet theoreticians like Wolfgang Kaiser and Lee Byron Jennings argue that there must be an aesthetic category which describes many spectators' obvious pleasure in images which might logically be thought to induce pain and displeasure. These images range from gruesome moments in tragedy to the crude jokes of the Commedia dell'Arte, from Hogarth's shocking drawings of London street life to Goya's beautiful, yet appalling, depictions of war, from gargoyles to Surrealist art and the modern horror film.
For Kaiser and Jennings, the grotesque includes seemingly unaesthetic and unappetizing qualities in art such as the monstrous, the ugly, the deformed, and the excessive. Both of these theoreticians have adapted the grotesque to the Aristotelian/Freudian idea of catharsis. In their theories the grotesque figure is used by artists to purge spectators of their fears of ugly, horrible or deformed creatures. Jennings refers to this cathartic function of the grotesque as the purging of the *formidolosa* by the *ridicula*. Thus the ugly, the monstrous or the excessive, that is the *formidolosa*, is managed and made bearable through the purgative function of the *ridicula*. The comedic aspect of grotesque imagery, through the pleasure of purgation, is then used to explain spectators’ pleasure in what would normally be considered revolting images. Normally grotesque humour is “black humour” or humour tinged with irony and even cruelty as in the presentation of the “idiots” in *Las Hurdes* or the attempted hanging of the grandfather in *Liolo* (Canada, 1970, Jean-Claude Lauzon). Real terrors are purged by this kind of humour, and are thus rendered harmless.

However, Kayser’s and Jennings’ interpretations of the grotesque do not explain the lingering effects of many grotesque images, those aspects of “tension and unresolvability” noted by Philip Thompson, and experienced by any spectator who has been disturbed by images like the sliced eyeball or the insects crawling out of the wounded hand in Buñuel’s and Salvador Dalí’s *Un Chien Andalou* (France, 1929). Although these images are comedic from some points of view (indeed they often induce defensive or uncomfortable laughter in the audience), they are also truly horrifying and not as easily purged as Kayser or Jennings would have us believe. Buñuel in particular uses blackly humorous grotesque images to both amuse and sting the spectator, and to strip away pretensions in a way that is highly political, but only cathartic in a very problematic sense.

The grotesque is used by Buñuel and others (like Federico Fellini, Ken Russell, Peter Greenaway, or Jean-Claude Lauzon to name only a few), as a language of contestation. Buñuel clearly intends the images in *Las Hurdes* to have a lasting effect on viewers. The emotions surrounding the horrors depicted in the film are not merely to be purged and left in the theatre after the film is over. They must be brought forward into the “real” world to both ameliorate the conditions of the Hurdanos and defamiliarize the conventions of the ethnographic documentary—that is, both political and aesthetic behaviours must be affected by grotesque images. Thus the grotesque is, at least from the political point of view, probably untenable as a purely purgative entity.

Two other theories of the grotesque seem to address these problems in more interesting ways. Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* and Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* apply the grotesque in a more complex, political manner; to works of art. The category referred to above as the *formidolosa* contains, in the Bakhtinian system, all that is excessively distressing to bourgeois society, including the bulging, excessive physical body (frequently represented as lower class), as opposed to the harmonious, beautiful classical form. Stallybrass and White observe that Bakhtin’s grotesque includes, “parodies, travesties and vulgar farce; and it included various genres of ‘Billingsgate,’ by which Bakhtin [designates] curses, oaths, slang, humor, popular tricks and jokes, scatological forms, in fact all the ‘low’ and ‘dirty’ sorts of folk humor.”

In short, it includes everything which could be opposed to and subversive of “official” culture and classical norms. Bakhtin includes in the *formidolosa* anything that might undermine the extraordinarily puritanical official *mores* of the Stalinist establishment of his time. Although this might be seen as a limitation on his usefulness globally, he makes the point that the grotesque can be a subversive and transgressive force regardless of its originating culture. This is an advance over earlier theories which were primarily psychological in emphasis and only partially convincing in their examination of some grotesque works which were both popular and at the same time aroused “official” displeasure. Moreover, Bakhtin stresses throughout his writing that there is an ambivalence about the grotesque. Since the grotesque attacks established and comfortable norms there will be some pain and some excitement in the stripping away of habit and established modes of thinking. Perhaps this very ambivalence is what makes Thomas react so strongly against the film: not everyone is amused by grotesque renderings of “real” people.

The idea of grotesque ambivalence and black humour allows for the “unresolved tension” noted by Thompson, and also for a shift from a concentration on a strictly cathartic grotesque to a more open and subversive enjoyment of the forbidden. Bakhtin’s theory permits a considerable offense to public morality and a crafty political usage of mockery and laughter, which the more homeopathic theories of Kaiser and Jennings tend to downplay. For Bakhtin, the grotesque is aimed, in a necessarily covert fashion, at Socialist Realism, the official and stifling preferred art form in the Soviet Union. Since the grotesque has existed throughout the history of art alongside, and in opposition to, classical and officially accepted forms, it is subversive and liberating and humorous, but it can
also be violent and upsetting and create extremely ambivalent responses in spectators.

Sally and Stallybrass and White are two cultural historians who base their theories of transgression in part upon Bakhtin. They turn Bakhtin's grotesque into a thoroughly gothic and repulsive, pleasure and pain. The ambivalent renderings of what is traditionally associated with the grotesque is problematic as an ambivalent spectatorial response incorporating but attraction and repulsion, pleasure and pain. The ambivalent rendering of catherism in the grotesque permits Stallybrass and White to account for the blackly humorous aspects of the category as well as to illuminate certain lasting effects of grotesque images. For them the grotesque is a serious, but frequently humorous language of transgression which exists alongside, and in opposition to, classical representations. I would argue that Buñuel mobilizes this ambivalent, political language of contestation in Las Hurdes to critique both documentary representations of "the Other" and the bourgeois spectator. As Robert Stam argues about Buñuel's cinema in general, "The focus of Buñuel's attack has one name—the Law—and many surnames: Authority, God the Father, the Pope, the President, the Pater Familias, but also Certainty of Origin, the Unity of Single Meaning, Dominant Cinema."12

Las Hurdes, which purports to be about a sightseeing trip to a remote and poverty-stricken area of Spain, is part of what might be called the Cinema of Cruelty—a cinema, which includes documentaries like Le Sang des bêtes (France, 1949, Georges Franju), Nuit et brouillard (France, 1955, Alain Resnais) and The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes (USA, 1971, Stan Brakhage). The experience of Las Hurdes is, however, far more radical than a straightforward revelation of the shocking ugliness and poverty endured by the Hurdano. The film is also a thoroughgoing deconstruction, through parody, of the conventions of the ethnographic documentary, and, as a consequence, the subject positions and pleasures offered therein. The extreme reaction of the Spanish government is, perhaps, due less to the film's depiction of Hurdano poverty and the rather ridiculous claim that it would adversely affect European tourism, than to the film's extremely subversive handling of the respectable institution of documentary film. Noël Burch has noted that the documentary, from its very beginnings, has been a favored form for the "enlightened" bourgeoisie,13 and perhaps the offense caused by Buñuel has more to do with his travesty of the form than with the depiction of the poor.

Whatever the subject matter of a subversive work of art, it is generally more dangerous to attack a culture's way of understanding or knowing the world than it is to attack some abuse or oppression alone. The history of drama contains several such "formal" problems with works of art. The great debate over Pierre Corneille's Le Cid because of its manhandling of decorum and proper dramatic form is well known.14 The disputes over Ibsen's treatment of "the well-made play" also come to mind. In our time, the well-publicized arguments about docudrama are another indication of the criticism which results when an artist uses a form in a way that might be construed as a criticism of established ways of knowing—whatever the "content" might be.

Before dealing with specific grotesque images and structures in Las Hurdes, it is essential to discuss certain aspects of conventional ethnographic documentaries since it is these conventions that Buñuel parodies. The ethnographic documentary, under the rubric of "education" or "enlightenment," purports to examine the lives of people specifically envisioned as "primitive." According to Burch many early documentaries depicted the lives of "exotic" people. These films, Burch claims, were shown in more expensive film houses, indicating a privileged, monied audience, and were distinct from the more working class, music-hall-inspired fictional films of the era.15

Until fairly recently the issue of documentary pleasure has been somewhat overlooked in film theory. Pleasure, as it has been envisioned to exist aesthetically, appears to be the province of the fiction film. For John Grierson, aesthetic pleasure takes on the connotation of an "opiate for the masses" when he accuses the Hollywood mogul of being, "more or less, frankly...a dope peddler."16 Aesthetic pleasure is only a side effect and secondary to the real role of documentary which is enlightenment or the acquisition of useful knowledge. Grierson despises "art for art's sake," arguing that it is "always a reflection of selfish wealth, selfish leisure and aesthetic decadence."17 Following Grierson, the main thrust of writing about documentary has been aimed at the examination of the relationship of documentary to reality, technology and ethics, rather than pleasure.

In a somewhat different vein, Pascal Bonitzer also considers knowledge the particular pleasure of the documentary—but it is a pleasure that he refers to as "jouissance."18 This "jouissance" works in two ways: as a personal, "orgasmic" pleasure in the power of accumulating knowledge, and
This hybridization is the most obvious aspect of *Las Hurdes*. The film presents itself as an appalling mixture of incompatible elements. The music, for example, is taken from Brahms' Fourth Symphony and it carries with it the connotations of elite art and class. This music very rapidly comes into conflict with the image: real children apparently starving and dying to the accompaniment of Brahms is strikingly inappropriate.

Another aspect of this clash of incompatibilities is the quality of the image itself. *Las Hurdes* is beautifully lit and shot. It has many images that could be considered painterly. But these images are not depictions of beautiful scenery or attractive native people. They depict suffering and death, like the close-up of the apparently diseased and dying child, or the baby's corpse. Surely this is an incongruous clash of incompatibles. One could add to this a rather unconventional use of deep focus photography. As Tom Conley has noted, deep focus has conventionally been used with the long take, but in *Las Hurdes* Buñuel chooses a rather brisk editing style which makes the narrator's journey of 27 minutes in all seem even more jarring.

The above aspects of *Las Hurdes* are rather obvious and well documented by Raymond Durgnat in his analysis of Buñuel's work. This clash of incompatibles may well be upsetting to a spectator who is assumed by the text to be the bourgeois individual pleased by *Nanook*. At the same time there is a perverse pleasure in upsetting the conventional discourse and escaping from it into something more daring and dangerous. In his theorization of cinematic semiotics, Umberto Eco argues that even the spectator's emotional responses are regulated by both cultural and aesthetic codes—that is, by an habitual affective response to texts, which may run along generic, cultural or purely iconic lines. He calls these rhetorical codes, and more specifically, “visual rhetorical figures.” Beautiful scenery, native peoples, and handsome photography in the ethnographic documentary are conventional and conventionally pleasing. The spectator expects these things, and responds to them accordingly. But what unproblematic response can be given to pleasingly composed depictions of “real” death and starvation, or Brahms played over the images of “idiots,” or a donkey being stung to death by a swarm of bees? The spectator's conventionally coded responses are disrupted in *Las Hurdes* by this violation of conventional visual rhetorical figures. In fact many spectators may not know how to respond to the combination of the aesthetically pleasing with the visually disgusting. The text sets out to produce an ambivalent response. The spectator receives gruesome images, beautifully fashioned, for example, the sight of infected mouths accompanied by classical music. The paradigm crisis in the viewer's response, created by the hybridization of

the broader political sense, as pleasure in the illusory mastery of the world, which documentary knowledge seems to confer upon the viewer. This makes the documentary, in Bonitzer's view, a particularly bourgeois form, and he characterizes the documentary voice as that of the bourgeois commentator who is absolutely authoritative and absolutely unimpeachable. Documentary, to both Burch and Bonitzer, is part and parcel of the nineteenth century imperialistic attempt to construct and control the world (indeed, Burch relates early "actualities" to the French colonial endeavour as its "Other." 31

Perhaps the most famous early ethnographic documentary is Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*. As an extremely popular as well as beautifully photographed film, *Nanook* helped to define the conventions of subsequent ethnographic documentaries, including *Las Hurdes*, which in some ways positions *Nanook* as its "Other." It is an extraordinary film—visually stunning and hopelessly complicit with nineteenth century romantic idealism. Through *Nanook* the spectator experiences both the "jouissance" of the acquisition of knowledge and visual mastery over the wilderness and the primitive. As in Barthes' myths, the Eskimo becomes a version of self, a romantic conquering hero who masters the wilderness. The Eskimos in *Nanook* are depoliticized, dehistoricized and made into representatives of Barthes' "Great Family of Man." Flaherty created, in *Nanook*, another version of the "noble savage" and in order to do this he had to suppress certain facts about Eskimo life—for example, the exploitation of Native peoples by the Hudson's Bay Company, and "problematic" social customs like polygamy. Thus *Nanook of the North* is a film which flatters spectators and comforts them with the knowledge that all people are as they are, have the same desires, are a part of what Barthes calls the myth of "the human condition," and not members of disruptive or oppositional cultures which might protest their treatment by colonial masters.

The power and popularity of *Nanook* was such that it soon became one of the central films in the history of documentary cinema. *Las Hurdes*, on the other hand, has never enjoyed the popularity of *Nanook*. If the Flaherty film can be seen to reassure and empower, *Las Hurdes* discomfits, distresses and with malice- aforethought, takes on the conventions of the ethnographic documentary, interrogating them and disrupting the comfortable positions offered by films like *Nanook*. To do this, Buñuel mobilizes two formal aspects of the grotesque referred to by Stallybrass and White as "hybridization" and "inversion." They define "hybridization" as "a process of in-mixing of binary opposites, particularly high and low, such that there is a heterodox merging of elements usually perceived as incompatible."
effect of the grotesque, does not produce a catharsis. At this level it creates difficulty and uncertainty for the viewer, not purgation. If anything is purged in *Las Hurdes*, it is the conventions of ethnographic documentary. They are examined and dismissed, and conventional subject positions are undermined along with them.

Equally important from the point-of-view of spectatorship is what Bakhtin and Stallybrass and White call "the inversion of status."26 Bakhtin draws this idea from the Saturnalia, an important Roman feast, where masters and slaves changed places—for a day.27 *Las Hurdes* is also a kind of Saturnalian event where, in the end, the spectator has changed places with the Hurdanos. An early high status accorded to the spectator is interchanged with the low status of the natives. The first third of the film puts the spectator in the conventionally superior and pleasurable subject position offered in traditional documentary films. This is done primarily through the agency of the narrator, a male, omniscient, voice-of-authority which guides the viewer through the early stages of the journey. The spectator enters the film as an outsider, a traveler, a superior human geographer, and the narrative voice prompts viewers, with its haughty attitude, to look down on the primitive Hurdanos. By the end of the film the spectator's confidence in this position is shaken by the fact that what at first appeared to be obvious—the primitive and self-destructive behaviour of the Hurdanos—is replaced by a greater understanding of their context and struggles to survive in an extremely hostile environment. In the end, the Hurdanos are not as foolish as we have been led to believe. As spectators, and in concert with the narrator, we have been mistaken and inhumane because we have misinterpreted not only their situation but their survival techniques as well.

Nevertheless, the film's grotesque elements put even the most sympathetic viewer in an ambiguous position. Consider, for example, the exotic and "barbaric" wedding celebration where men tear the heads off live roosters suspended above a village street. This sequence has rather prurient implications in that there appear to be a number of unexplained sexual connotations. The sex lives of "primitives," or the depiction of nakedness has often been a covert source of pleasure for the spectator in ethnography. The creation of a prurient gaze is part of the grotesque which, Stallybrass and White have argued, is an aspect of its attraction/repulsion: "Repugnance and fascination are the twin poles of the process in which a political imperative to reject and eliminate the debasing 'low' conflicts powerfully and unpredictably with a desire for this Other."28 If the spectators are repelled by some of the disgusting images, they may also be fascinated by the prurient appeal of others. This is the curious and transgressive pleasure of the grotesque, and also one of its pitfalls since it can easily lead to misinterpretations of various kinds, especially in societies sensitive to controversial depictions of "the Other."

The wedding celebration sequence ends with the narrator observing that everyone (except for the narrator, and by extension, the viewer who is aligned with him) gets drunk. In these early sequences the text prompts the spectator to feel some disgust, and some fascination, with the "barbarity" of the Hurdanos. This disgust positions the spectator above the object of disgust. Both the spectator and the narrator watch most of the wedding ceremony from above, the camera reinforcing both their distance from it and their superior social position. As Stallybrass and White note, "the agencies of disgust work to draw a distinction between the bourgeois subject and "the Other."29 Everyone, except for the narrator and the viewer, drink the village water, water which is shown to be used by the village pigs. As the narrator says that the water contains "disgusting filth," the film shows a Hurdano child rather vigorously splashing a baby's mouth full of water. School age children dip their bread in it, while the narrator says that the children's parents are so ignorant that they do not know what bread is, and in fact take it away from their starving children. The early part of the film reinforces, again and again, the low status, ignorance and filth of the Hurdanos, mobilizing the agencies of disgust to lower the Hurdanos and raise the spectator above the filth and ignorance. The camera watches both the children and the pigs from a high angle, again as if looking down on them both physically and socially.

The use of the pig is particularly relevant here. Stallybrass and White have described the pig as one of the most important images in the iconography of the grotesque. They claim that bourgeois spectators have, from very early on, had ambivalent attitudes towards the pig and as such it is a very valuable symbol in the language of contestation. The pig is both a prized source of food and an object of considerable repugnance. They argue that it connotes filth, bad manners, greed and female sexuality and it is, in fact, often part of "a discourse of sin and evil,"30 sin and evil being categories which arouse attraction and repulsion. In the early sections of *Las Hurdes*, the pig is central to the mobilization of the spectator's disgust and hence his or her feelings of superiority over those who live in filth with pigs. Stallybrass and White also ask if one of the aims of the cultured bourgeois class is "to have nothing in common with pigs—was not that the aim of every educated bourgeois subject—to get as far away from the smell of the pigsty as possible?"31 By showing the Hurdanos cohabiting with pigs, Buñuel allows the spectator to enjoy superiority over them.
Indeed, this superiority has been said to be a quality of the voice-of-authority narration in general. Bonitzer argues that, "The unity of the voice and meaning in the commentary-off defines a regime of mastery and oppression." Furthermore, he notes that it is extremely difficult to question an invisible omniscient narrator. If a narrator is a visible presence, his body and paralinguistic forms of communication are available to us. But a disembodied voice is far more difficult to challenge, and viewers have a tendency to accept voice-over narration as truth, especially since the image track often seems to prove the truth of what the voice is saying. The narrator is the only available source, in the absence of written text, to help interpret what is supposed to be important in the image. In the early part of Las Hurdes the narrator has an unchallenged authority over the images, and the spectator is left with little recourse but to accept what he says about the villagers.

However, the feelings mobilized against the Hurdanos begin to change in the schoolroom sequence. For the first time the narrator asks the viewer to feel some compassion for the Hurdano children, while the ironic tone of the narration prompts disgust with the stupidity of the teacher who tells starving children to "respect the property of others." Irony is a device that tends to create feelings of superiority. Because we are aligned with the narrator and get the point that the teacher apparently misses, we feel superior to him. Although this superior position with respect to the Hurdanos is not unassailable and indeed can be seen, even in the early stages of the film, to be somewhat precarious, in the opening sequences the spectator shares the omniscience and superiority of the narrator.

After the school room scene, the film continues its travelogue, taking the viewers to the village of Nemoral, where they are greeted by a grotesque and shocking piece of bad manners. The entrance to the village is surrounded by what the narrator calls a "choir of idiots": a group of obviously mentally retarded children. This part of the film includes a number of sequences with the mentally deficient, who are said to be the products of illness and incest. What is shocking is not only the depiction of these people in a travelogue, but the term "idiots" which is repeated a number of times. At one point the narrator even says, "And here are some more idiots"—generally provoking some ambivalent laughter in the audience.

The mentally deficient have often been hidden from view in bourgeois society. The film's depiction of them is shocking enough, but the narrator's use of the word "idiot" may well be considered very ill mannered in a culture which has created all manner of euphemisms to more gently describe the handicapped. Some of the "idiots" are quite deformed, another disturbing aspect of Las Hurdes. Not surprisingly, "the mad, the criminal, the sick, the unruly, the sexually transgressive" are all aspects of the "grotesque body" as defined by Bakhtin. They belong to "the Other" of bourgeois culture. This is quite a strong moment in the film, but it is only the first in a barrage of grotesque images fired broadside at the spectator. Buñuel draws heavily upon the grotesque paradigm here for horrifying images to create distress. In addition to showing a number of "idiots," he also includes close-ups of the diseased (a woman with a large, protruding goiter), a hag with child (a woman so wasted by poverty and disease that she looks twice her age), a diseased and suffering child whose inflamed mouth is shown in extreme close-up, the slaughter of some goats, and the slow agonizing death of a donkey stung to death by bees. To make matters worse the high angle shots have disappeared from the film and with them the spectator's superior, distanced position. The camera generally shows the grotesque images in the second part from eye level.

These images are extraordinary on a number of counts. To begin with they are all the opposite of the "classical body" in that they draw attention to impurity (both in the sense of dirt and mixed categories), heterogeneity masking protuberant distention, disproportion, exorbitancy, clamosity, decentered or eccentric arrangements, a focus on gaps, orifices and symbolic filth, physical needs and pleasures of the lower bodily stratum, materiality and parody.

As grotesque disruptions of the classical they are shocking enough. But these images also implicate the viewer and the narrator in the depiction of suffering. This is particularly true of the dying child, the goats and the agonized donkey. The narrator describes all of these images in the same unemotional way that he describes the scenery. No compassion registers in the voice. But the images demand a different feeling. The child is encountered lying by the side of the road. The narrator says that she has been lying there for a number of days. Apparently no one cares about her. The narrator describes the infection in her mouth and the camera moves in for a close-up of her inflamed gums. The narrator, or one of his companions, grabs the child's face, and opens the mouth as the narrator describes her condition. As the narrator leaves her he notes that when he returned a few days later the child had died.

This sequence is upsetting for a number of reasons. The "gaping mouth" is one of the privileged images of the grotesque, and it is ugly and
shocking as such. But also outrageous are the narrator's disregard for, and inhumane treatment of, the child, his lack of concern and refusal to help. Indeed, his manner of handling her suggests that her status is that of a "specimen" for ethnographic analysis. This sequence may well prompt the viewer to turn against the narrator with his callous disregard for her misery and the seriousness of her illness. One can add to this the narrator's lack of feeling for the agonies of the donkey and the film's dwelling, for a very long time (almost thirty seconds in a film in which the average shot length is between nine and ten seconds) upon its awful death. The narrator's sadistic fascination with the animal's death further undermines his credibility.

But perhaps the most devastating blow to the narrator's authority in Las Hurdes is the obviously staged death of the goat—a sequence not discussed by Thomas. We see the goat's death from two separate directions, and we also see a puff of smoke as the goat "accidentally" falls from the cliff. This is a clearly marked violation of documentary principles which demand that events not be staged, but captured as if by accident—and of course the narrator speaks as though the goat has fallen by accident. Bill Nichols argues that "documentaries run some risk of credibility in reenacting an event: the special indexical bond between image and historical referent is ruptured." If an image appears to have been staged for the camera it is far less authoritative than images which appear unstaged. This obviously staged event in Las Hurdes threatens to bring the whole documentary edifice down. Are we to believe in anything the film has shown us? Was the dying child really dying or just a prop on Buñuel's stage? This part of Las Hurdes steadily undermines the spectator's superior and untroubled consumption of the film, not only through the grotesque images and the ambivalent feelings that they create, but also by undermining the confidence that spectators conventionally have in documentary images and narration as some version of "the truth."

As mentioned above, Stallybrass and White discuss grotesque affect under the heading of "inversion of status." An "inversion of status" may well be the effect of this section of the film on the viewer and the subject position normally occupied in ethnographic documentary. Far from being the moral superior of the by now discredited narrator, the spectator shares his degradation in an almost masochistic way. Stallybrass and White argue that a prolonged and serious exposure of the bourgeois subject to grotesque images produces a "status degradation" in the subject, the result of an attack by the grotesque upon the authority of the ego. There is both pleasure and pain here, attraction and repulsion. The effect of the grotesque, although not identical with the masochistic, nonetheless shares certain similarities of response with it. The secure, coherent, masterful and authoritative subject position offered to the spectator in the conventional ethnographic documentary is undermined, and viewers lose their position of visual mastery and moral superiority. They suffer the same fate as the narrator: they are chastised by the film. In the larger sense, Buñuel performs, through Las Hurdes, a deconstruction of documentary conventions and a destruction of the kind of spectatorship implied by those conventions. Is it any wonder that Las Hurdes was not a popular film?

The last part of Las Hurdes humanizes the Hurdanos. It both explains and creates compassion for their suffering, which is now seen, not as a result of their ignorance or moral inferiority, but as the result of complex historical factors including the exploitation of the villagers by the church, a harsh and unfruitful landscape and certain unavoidable factors such as the anopheles mosquito and poisonous snakes. But it must be understood that the Hurdanos are never sentimentalized by the film. If there is a central quality to Buñuel's cruel representations, it is the refusal of sentimentality or melodramatic pathos; his cruelty is quite cold and calculating in the affective sense. He resolutely refuses sentiment and idealization throughout this film, and he depicts the Hurdanos as they are, not as he would have them. They never rise to the "noble savage" heights of Nanook.

On the other hand, contrary to bourgeois mythology of the poor as both immoral and lazy, Buñuel shows the Hurdanos to be quite industrious, compassionate and resourceful within their limited context. They are the victims, rather than the cause, of their plight. The film shows them labouring, however unprofitably, to produce crops to feed themselves. They are hindered, not by sloth or immorality, but by a lack of fertilizer and modern agricultural techniques. The villagers must go many miles on foot to get what little natural fertilizer is available to them. Then they carry it in backpacks to the village where it is left to rot on the floors of their homes until it is ready to be used—an ingenious, if unsanitary, way of attempting to solve their agricultural problems. But, of course, many are bitten by snakes while collecting the fertilizer, and die either of the bite, or unsanitary attempts to cure it. This last part of the film shows that the Hurdanos had to be extremely tough and resourceful to survive their extraordinarily poor living conditions. That they have survived at all is a tribute to their own efforts in the absence of help from any other quarter, including the church which, we are told, has very expensive appointments in a village where children starve.
The film also shows that they are moral people who will travel miles to bury their dead properly. The dead cannot be buried in the villages because of the rockiness of the land, so they must be transported down river if they are to receive an adequate burial. One of the film's most moving and aesthetically pleasing shots is that of the bereaved mother mourning the loss of her infant. It is an image of great dignity in suffering, and it is highly affective: it mobilizes the spectator's sympathy for the woman, as it further undermines the authority of the callous narrator who is insensitive to her suffering and even attempts to give the spectator a voyeuristic peek at the dead infant. It also raises questions about the abandonment of the sick child earlier in the film. Perhaps this too was staged, or falsely reported by the narrator. This sequence finally removes all credibility from the voice. His pretensions to moral superiority and his voyeuristic enjoyment of the plight of his "inferiors" have been exposed, but not without implicating the spectator as well. Along with the narrator, spectators enjoy the pretense of moral superiority, but they also experience its loss. The comfortable pew becomes rather less comfortable.

Thus the film performs, through the agency of the grotesque, a number of affective procedures. It creates a more compassionate view of the poor, stripped of a false and cloying sentimentality, a sentimentality which produces nothing but the spectator's pleasure in strong, vicariously felt emotions. Thomas notes that in Las Hurdes "there are none of the sympathetic identifications with exemplary characters that we find in Flaherty's films," and indeed there are not. Thomas sees this as a fatal weakness in Buñuel's film. However, this issue is not as simple as it would first appear. The discussion around the usefulness and morality of "pity" in the arts has been the subject of heated debate from Plato to Brecht with many stops in between. In 1758 Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued, "I hear it said that tragedy leads to pity through fear. So it does, but what is this pity? A fleeting and vain emotion which feeds on a few tears and which has never produced the slightest act of humanity." Characteristic of Surrealist ethnography, pity is rejected in favour of troublingly ambiguous emotions generated not only by the plight of the Hurdanos, and the film's depiction of their disturbingly grotesque bodies (which troubles Thomas so much), but also by the disruption of documentary conventions.

It has been Buñuel's practice, not only in Las Hurdes, but also in another film about the poor, Olvidados (Mexico, 1950), to avoid pity and sentimentality. As Buñuel himself has argued, "I loathe films that make the poor romantic and sweet." Rather than seeing the lack of sentimentality in Las Hurdes as merely a rhetorical flourish to amuse the jaded members of the avant garde, it might be better to see it as a conscious aesthetic choice, something which the artist aimed at the audience with considerable malice. In the end he creates a more compassionate view of the poor by refusing to romanticize them or allow the spectator to waste tears on them. In fact, Buñuel managed some small amelioration of the Hurdanos' condition. As Aranda notes,

Undoubtedly the progress of Las Hurdes owes much to the scandal provoked by Buñuel. For those who regard him as a sadist, relishing the misery of the land with his camera instead of doing something about it, time has provided the answer. If Buñuel had practised charity in the region instead of making his film, the inhabitants would certainly have had no long-term betterment. The film effected more in Madrid than a mess of pottage would have done in Las Hurdes.

Furthermore, the processes of hybridization and inversion bring about a severe upset in the subject position ordinarily offered to the cinematic spectator. This undermining of subjectivity is essential to cruel and difficult works of art like Las Hurdes. The position of omniscience, authority and visual mastery is severely questioned, and the conventions of ethnographic documentary are also upset in this process. The voice-of-authority narration is undermined, and as Pascal Bonitzer observes, "What is devised in Las Hurdes is a radical testing of the mastery based on the commentary, on imperialism, and a colonialism, which is deep-seated in documentary." The grotesque attack upon the norm, or the "classical body," takes the form of an attack not only upon documentary cinema but also upon subjectivity itself.

Las Hurdes, despite the seriousness of its project, remains an extremely humorous and enjoyable film. The pleasure it brings is the pleasure envisioned by Bakhtin for grotesque representations in general—that is, pleasure in the subversion and undermining of repressive norms or the dominant discourse, here the conventions of what Buñuel sees as the pompous, bourgeois documentary. Las Hurdes allows no ultimate pleasure in a visually masterful subject position, no lasting sense of superiority over the "unwashed," but there can be a pleasure in the release from restrictive convention. But it is a pleasure which is necessarily ambivalent, for if one is released from the straitjacket of convention, one also loses the customary authority and certainty of a coherent subject position.
I began this article by saying that not everyone likes *Las Hurdes*. Perhaps an ambivalent response to the film is an aspect of the grotesque itself. As Bakhtin argues, "Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope, it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent; it is gay, triumphant and at the same time mocking and deriding."47 *Las Hurdes* mocks both documentary form and the spectator but perhaps offers a less denigrating place from which to view "the Other." Unlike Thomas, I find *Las Hurdes* a liberating experience—not an entirely comfortable one to be sure—but it is nonetheless enlightening, amusing and distressing at the same time.

NOTES
4. Buñuel, 141.
5. Thomas, 26.
11. Stallybrass and White, 8.
17. Grierson, 41.

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mалformed, I still would argue that this is a nasty piece of work on Buñuel’s part.

36. Bakhtin, 22-23.
37. Stallybrass and White, 23.
38. Stallybrass and White, 22.
40. The relationship between the grotesque, black humour and masochism is an intriguing, if unexamined one. All seem to impose a kind of loss of subjectivity upon the spectator; all three seem to promote a degree of affectivity which tends to reduce the distance between spectator and work. Proponents of affect and masochism, like Antonin Artaud, have seized upon the grotesque as well to produce strong feelings of both pleasure and pain for spectators.
41. Stallybrass and White, 35.
42. Thomas, 28.
44. Aranda, 137.
45. Aranda, 93.
46. Bonitzer, 239.
47. Bakhtin, 11-12.

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ERIN MANNING

THE HAUNTED HOME:
Colour Spectrums in Robert Lepage’s Le Confessionnal


Spectral asymmetry interrupts all specularity.1 The asymmetry of the specter, of that which can never quite be seen, is spectral. It operates within a spectrum that is based on difference, on a visual after-image, composed by the illusion of uneven colours rather than straight blood-lines. The asymmetry of the specter is specular, with the reflective property of a mirror, of an image, of an other. In the face of the reflection, we speculate on the nature of the apparition: the speculation is itself a conjecture, an interpretation of signs or omens, a divination, a ghost. This logic of haunting is not an ontology or a thinking of being. Rather, the logic of haunting operates as the conjuration and the exorcism of presence and grounding. Separating the ground from its structure, the specter troubles the notion of the home, of the stable entity that is both the container and the contained: the specter haunts the home.

Spectral interpretation is performative, that is, it transforms the very thing it interprets, altering both the ground and the structure. The economic, the familiar, the domestic, the national, frightens itself. It feels occupied in the secret (Geheimnis)2 of its inside by what is most strange,