

## **Exterminating Angel / El angel EXterminador (1962) Luis Bunuel**

P Michell, 2016.

“The impossibility of satisfying a simple desire ...” Bunuel.

### **Synopsis:**

The great screen surrealist [Luis Buñuel](#) co-wrote and directed this dark, bitterly witty satire. A group of people in formal dress arrives at an elegantly appointed home for a dinner party. However, once dinner is over and the guests retire to the drawing room, they discover that the servants have gone away, and for some reason they cannot leave. There is no explanation why -- there are no locked doors or barred windows preventing them from going home -- but the guests are convinced that they're stranded. Left to their own devices, they slowly but gradually degenerate into genteel savagery, taking an axe to a water pipe for drinking water, killing and eating a sheep that was to be part of the post-dinner entertainment, hiding the bodies of dead guests in the closet, dabbling in witchcraft, and burning the furniture. [Buñuel](#)'s dry, quixotic wit is abundantly displayed in this film. ~ Mark Deming, Rovi

Ebert - A macabre comedy, a mordant view of human nature that suggests we harbor savage instincts and unspeakable secrets. Take a group of prosperous dinner guests and pen them up long enough, Bunuel suggests, and they'll turn on one another like rats in an overpopulation study.

Bunuel's films were often well liked at film festivals and received many prizes. Angel won the International Film Critics Award (FIPRESCI) at Cannes.

Producer: Gustavo Alatraste

Director: Luis Bunuel

Screenplay: Luis Alcoriza, Jose Bergamin, Luis Bunuel

Cinematography: Gabriel Figueroa

Film Editing: Carlos Savage

Art Direction: Jesus Bracho

Music: Raul Lavista

Cast: Silvia Pinal (Leticia `La Valkiria'), Enrique Rambal (Edmundo Nobile), Claudio Brook (Julio), Jose Baviera (Leandro Gomez), Augusto Benedico (Carlos Conde), Antonio Bravo (Sergio Russell).

BW-95m.

## **Luis Bunuel (1900-1983)**

Few people have had an influence on cinema. Having made films like: Un chien andalou [with Salvador Dali] (1928), Viridiana (1961), Diary of a Chambermaid (1964), Belle de Jour (1976), the Milky Way (1968), Tristana (1968), The Discreet

Charm of the Bourgeoisie (1972), Phantom of Liberty (1974), Obscure Object of Desire (1977).

When Luis Buñuel died at age 83, his [obituary](#) in the *New York Times* called him "an iconoclast, moralist, and revolutionary who was a leader of *avant-garde surrealism* in his youth and a dominant international movie director half a century later"  
Excellent Wikipedia entry on him:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luis\\_Buñuel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luis_Buñuel)

In 2008 I screened Bunuel's Belle de Jour which included the following:

With Un Chien Andalou (1928) he worked with Salvador Dali. Ants, eye being cut.  
Horse on piano, draw bridge dropping a horse;  
Viridiana (1961) recreation of the Last Supper populated by beggars.

Surrealism and cinema. High art and commercialism – all his films made a profit in Europe and thus he got monies to make more films.

No villains, no unflawed heroes. Everyone is on (becomes) same level.

'We live imaginary lives in which we hold varying symbolic reference for different people.'

Realism of films (most shot at ¾ length) – with reluctance to use subjective camera work.

His films are about dreams – eg: Exterminating Angel where the characters can only 'escape' when they have slept and awoken in their 'original' positions.

### **Trivia:**

Not shown in the U.S until 1967.

Film has many (27) repeat shots.

Was banned in Russia because the idea of people not being allowed to "leave a party" was considered offensive and anti-government.

In his autobiography [Luis Buñuel](#) claims he was asked by Warner Brothers to work on a story that eventually was filmed as [The Beast with Five Fingers](#) (1946). "The Exterminating Angel" contains many of the elements of the earlier film including the large mansion, piano recital, and stabbing of a disembodied hand.

[Luis Buñuel](#) expressed frustration in regards to the film's low budget and the lack of amenities available on set in Mexico. As an example of these hardships, Buñuel

recalled that the film operated on such an austere budget that he could not even afford to purchase fine table napkins for the dinner party scenes, nor could such napkins be easily obtained in Mexico at the time. He was only able to procure one such cloth napkin for a close-up shot of the dinner table when the film's makeup artist brought one from her home.

## **Quotes:**

Sadoul quotes Bunuel – as “a metaphor, a deeply felt, disturbing reflection of the life of modern man, a witness to fundamental preoccupations of our time. Its images, like the images in a dream, do not reflect reality, but themselves create it.”

Bunuel - “I have always been an atheist, thank God ... I believe it is necessary to find God in man, its a very straightforward attitude.”

## **Reviews:**

Senses of Cinema: Castaways of Providence Street.

Mairead Phillips.

<http://sensesofcinema.com/2013/cteq/the-castaways-of-providence-street-on-luis-bunuels-the-extermimating-angel/>

## **Roger Ebert**

May 11, 1997

The dinner guests arrive twice. They ascend the stairs and walk through the wide doorway, and then they arrive again--the same guests, seen from a higher camera angle. This is a joke and soon we will understand the punch line: The guests, having so thoroughly arrived, are incapable of leaving.

Luis Bunuel's "The Exterminating Angel" (1962) is a macabre comedy, a mordant view of human nature that suggests we harbor savage instincts and unspeakable secrets. Take a group of prosperous dinner guests and pen them up long enough, he suggests, and they'll turn on one another like rats in an overpopulation study.

Bunuel begins with small, alarming portents. The cook and the servants suddenly put on their coats and escape, just as the dinner guests are arriving. The hostess is furious; she planned an after-dinner entertainment involving a bear and two sheep. Now it will have to be canceled. It is typical of Bunuel that such surrealistic touches are dropped in without comment.

The dinner party is a success. The guests whisper slanders about each other, their eyes playing across the faces of their fellow guests with greed, lust and envy. After dinner, they stroll into the drawing room, where we glimpse a woman's purse, filled with chicken feathers and rooster claws. A doctor predicts that one of the women will be bald within a week. But the broader outlines of the gathering seem normal enough: Drinks are passed, the piano is played, everyone looks elegant in dinner dress.

Then, in a series of subtle developments, it becomes apparent that no one can leave. They make preliminary gestures. They drift toward the hallway. There is nothing to stop them. But they cannot leave. They never exactly state that fact; there is an unspoken, rueful acceptance of the situation, as they make themselves comfortable on sofas and rugs.

This is a brilliant opening for an insidious movie. The tone is low key, but so many sinister details have accumulated that by the time the guests settle down for the night, Bunuel has us wrapped in his spell.

He was the most iconoclastic and individual of directors, a Spaniard who drifted into the orbit of the surrealists in Paris, who for many years directed the Spanish dubs for Hollywood films, whose greatest work was done between the ages of 60 and 77. His first film, "[Un Chien Andalou](#)" (1928), co-directed by Salvador Dali, caused an uproar (he filled his pockets with stones, he wrote in his autobiography, so he would have something to throw if the audience attacked him). It contained one of the most famous images in cinema, of a cloud cutting across the face of the moon, paired with a razor blade slicing an eyeball.

After that film, he made the scandalous and long-repressed "L'Age d'Or" and the scabrous documentary "Land Without Bread," shot in the poorest corner of Spain. Bunuel didn't direct another film until he became an exile in Mexico in the late 1940s. There he made both commercial and personal projects, almost all of them displaying his obsessions. An enemy of Franco's Spain, he was anti-fascist, anti-clerical and anti-bourgeois. He also had a sly streak of foot fetishism ("That was a wonderful afternoon little Luis spent on the floor of his mother's closet when he was 12," Pauline Kael once said, "and he's been sharing it with us ever since.").

His firmest conviction was that most people were hypocrites--the sanctimonious and comfortable most of all. He also had a streak of nihilism; in one film, a Christ figure, saddened by the sight of a dog tied to a wagon spoke and too tired to keep up, buys the dog to free it. As he does, another dog tied to another wagon limps past unnoticed in the background.

By the time he came to make "The Exterminating Angel" in 1962, Bunuel's career was on its delayed upswing. He had made a great international hit, "[Viridiana](#)," in 1960; it won many festival prizes and represented his return to Spain after decades overseas. But its central image--a scandalous tableau re-creating the Last Supper--

displeased the Spanish censors, and he was back in Mexico again and primed for bitter satire when he made "The Exterminating Angel."

Obviously, the dinner guests represent the ruling class in Franco's Spain. Having set a banquet table for themselves by defeating the workers in the Spanish Civil War, they sit down for a feast, only to find it never ends. They're trapped in their own bourgeois cul-de-sac. Increasingly resentful at being shut off from the world outside, they grow mean and restless; their worst tendencies are revealed.

Of course, Bunuel never made his political symbolism that blatant. "The Exterminating Angel" plays as a deadpan comedy about the unusual adventures of his dinner guests. Hours lengthen into days, and their dilemma takes on a ritualistic quality--it seems like the natural state of things. The characters pace in front of the open door. There is an invisible line they cannot cross. One guest says to another, "Wouldn't it be a good joke if I sneaked up and pushed you out?" The other says: "Try it, and I'll kill you." Soldiers are ordered to enter the house, but cannot. A child runs boldly toward the house, and scampers away again. Whatever inhibits the guests inhibits their rescuers.

Conditions deteriorate. Guests snatch an ax from the wall and break through plaster to open a pipe for drinking water. Two lovers kill themselves. The bodies are stacked in a closet. There are whiffs of black magic. The sheep wander into the room, are killed and cooked on a fire made from broken furniture; so close to civilization is the cave.

Bunuel belongs to a group of great directors who obsessively reworked the themes that haunted them. There is little stylistically to link Ozu, Hitchcock, Herzog, Bergman, Fassbinder or Bunuel, except for this common thread: Some deep wound or hunger was imprinted on them early in life, and they worked all of their careers to heal or cherish it. Bunuel was born in 1900, so the dates of his films correspond to the years of his life. He had the most remarkable late flowering in movie history. His Mexican films of the 1940s and '50s are often inspired--especially "Los Olvidados" (1950) and "The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz" and "El" (both 1955). "Viridiana" was his international comeback, and then came "The Exterminating Angel," which he said might be his last film--but the curtain was just rising on the great days of his career. His most famous film, "[Belle de Jour](#)" (1967), won the grand prize at Venice. It starred [Catherine Deneuve](#) as a respectable Parisian housewife who becomes fascinated by a famous bordello and finds herself working there two or three afternoons a week.

At the prize ceremony at Venice, Bunuel again announced his retirement. Not quite. In 1970, he starred Deneuve again, in "[Tristana](#)," a morbid romance between an aging pederast and the woman he adopts, mistreats and loses. After her leg is amputated, she returns to him for support, and revenge.

Then came three great films in which Bunuel's talent flowed in a great liberated stream of wicked satire and cheerful obsession. "[The Discreet Charm of the](#)

[Bourgeoisie](#)" (1972), which won the Oscar as best foreign film, is a reversal of "Exterminating Angel." This time dinner guests are forever sitting down to a feast, but repeatedly frustrated in their desire to eat. Then came "[The Phantom of Liberty](#)" (1974), a free-form film that began with one group of characters, then followed another, and another. His last film was "[That Obscure Object of Desire](#)" (1977), about an aging man who believes one woman and no other can satisfy his desires; Bunuel had the woman played interchangeably by two different actresses.

Bunuel died in 1983, leaving behind a wonderful autobiography in which he said the worst thing about death was that he would not be able to read tomorrow's newspaper. He created a world so particular, it is impossible to watch any Bunuel film for very long without knowing who its director was. "The Exterminating Angel" begins with the statement, "The best explanation of this film is that, from the standpoint of pure reason, there is no explanation." He might have added, "Those seeking reason or explanations are in the wrong theater."

## Turner Classic Movies

A group of socially prominent guests arrive for a formal dinner party but find themselves unable to leave the drawing room after the meal. Some unexplainable force prevents their escape and as time passes the social order begins to break down. The guests give in to fear, superstitions and irrational acts as the disasters mount; one man has a heart attack and his body is hidden in the closet, two lovers commit suicide and a cancer-ridden guest is deprived of his morphine. A sheep intended for an after-dinner skit is slaughtered for food and a marauding bear crashes the party. Only one person, Leticia (Silvia Pinal), holds the key to the group's unexplainable entrapment which she discovers in a surprising denouement.

Made ten years before *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972), Luis Bunuel's **The Exterminating Angel** (1962) mirrors some of the situations and themes of that director's 1972 masterpiece, particularly in its contempt for the idle rich and its unique mixture of surrealism and black comedy. Although Bunuel would later regard **The Exterminating Angel** as a disappointment, many film historians consider it one of the essential masterworks in the director's oeuvre, second only to *L'Age d'or* (1930). While *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* was a more polished and sophisticated production filmed in France - in color and Cinemascope - and featured a cast of renowned European actors (Fernando Rey, Delphine Seyrig, Stephane Audran, et al), **The Exterminating Angel** is arguably the more impactful film with its starkly realistic black-and-white cinematography by the great Gabriel Figueroa, the lack of a music score and its unrelenting attack on organized religion, bourgeois values and other targets, rendered in imagery that still has the power to shock.

According to Bunuel, the title came from the Bible but it was also a reference to both

a Spanish cult, the apostolics of 1828, and a group of Mormons. He also loved the sound of it. As he stated in his autobiography, *My Last Sigh*, "If I saw **The Exterminating Angel** on a marquee, I'd go in and see it on the spot." (Another source claims the working title was actually *The Castaways of Providence Street* but was changed to **The Exterminating Angel**, the proposed name for a play by Bunuel's friend, Jose Bergamin, that was never written). As for the story, the director mostly improvised as he went along, embellishing the basic situation with stylistic decisions - the use of repetition, a circular narrative structure and autobiographical details. Bunuel liked repetition in his films because of its hypnotic and dreamlike effect and stated in an interview with Tomas Perez Turrent that "When I finished the editing [on **The Exterminating Angel**], Gabriel Figueroa, the cinematographer, rushed up to me very alarmed: 'Listen sir, there's something wrong with the print. A scene is repeated. The editor must have made a mistake.' I told him, 'But Gabriel, I always do my own editing. Besides, you were my cinematographer and you know that when we repeated the scene, we shot it from another angle. I repeated the scene on purpose...' "Ah, now I see," he said, but he looked really frightened."

In *My Last Sigh*, Bunuel also revealed "there are many things in the film taken directly from life. I went to a large dinner party in New York where the hostess had decided to amuse her guests by staging various surprises: for example, a waiter who stretched out to take a nap on the carpet in the middle of dinner while he was carrying a tray of food. (In the film, of course, the guests don't find his antics quite so amusing.) She also brought in a bear and two sheep."

One reason Bunuel was disappointed with the completed version of **The Exterminating Angel** is because it didn't go far enough. He felt he censored himself and if he remade it he "would leave the people locked up for a month, to the point where they would resort to cannibalism and fighting to the death, in order to show, perhaps, that aggression is innate." He also felt hampered by the low budget, stating in his autobiography, "Despite the beauty of the house where it was shot and my effort to select actors who didn't look particularly Mexican, there was a certain tawdriness in many of its aspects. We couldn't get any really fine table napkins, for instance, and the only one I could show on camera was borrowed from the makeup artist." Nevertheless, Bunuel still delighted in confounding critics and moviegoers who tried to interpret the film's meaning. For one scene, Bunuel said, "It suddenly occurred to me that Silvia [Rosa Elena Durgel] should tie a blindfold around the sheep's eyes and hand Nobile [Enrique Rambal] the dagger. And that was that. Completely improvised, without any thought to whether anything was symbolic. A good symbol of nothing. Despite this, several critics gave various interpretations of the scene. The sheep represented Christianity, the knife, blasphemy...I intended none of that, everything was arbitrary. I only tried to evoke some sort of disturbing image."

One unforgettable image - in a dream sequence - was that of a crawling severed hand, a popular visual motif for Bunuel. He used it as the basis for his aborted 1946

Hollywood film for Warner Bros., *The Beast with Five Fingers* (he left the project and Robert Florey completed it). He also introduced it in *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), his landmark surrealist short (a collaboration with artist Salvador Dali) that opens with an eyeball being slit with a straight razor before moving on to a scene of ants devouring a severed hand.

When **The Exterminating Angel** was screened at the Cannes Film Festival it was coolly received. Biographer Francisco Aranda wrote in his book, *Luis Bunuel*, "...when the critics at the Cannes press conference asked Juan Luis why there is a bear in the film, wandering through a smart party, he answered, "Because my father likes bears." It's true. There are those who interpret the bear as the Soviet Union about to devour the bourgeoisie. That is nonsense. Then they asked him what was the meaning of the repetitions of shots in the film. I had anticipated this and told Juan Luis: "Answer that when I finished the film I decided it was still short, so to lengthen it..." People always want an explanation for everything. It is the consequence of centuries of bourgeois education. And for everything for which they cannot find an explanation, they resort in the last instance to God. But what is the use of that to them? Eventually they have to explain God."