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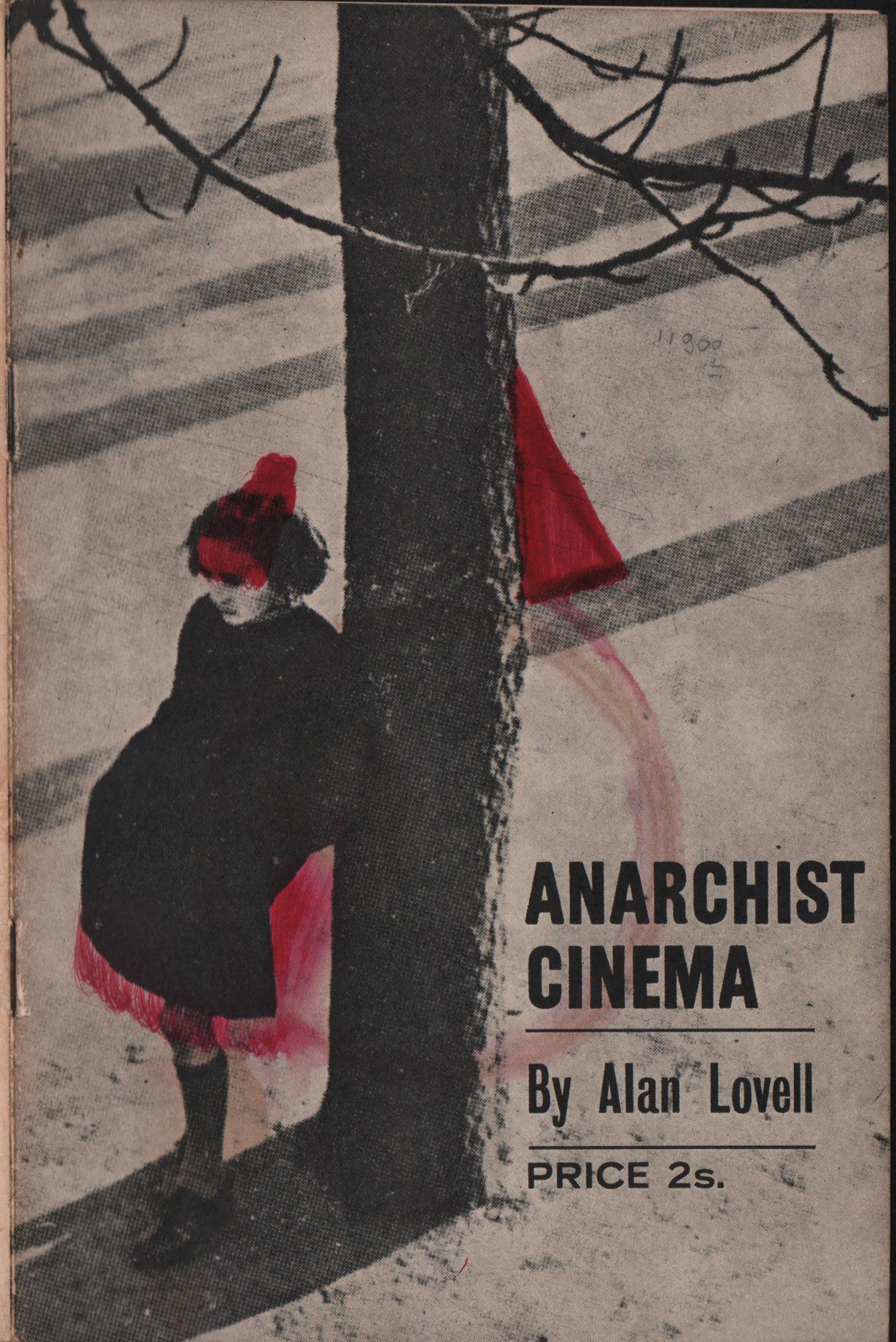
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# ANARCHIST CINEMA

By Alan Lovell

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Ray Gosling  
London '62

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## *anarchist cinema*

Neo-realist reality is incomplete, official and altogether reasonable; but the poetry, the mystery, everything which completes and enlarges tangible reality is completely missing from its work. Luis Bunuel — Poetry and the Cinema

Jean Vigo, Luis Bunuel and Georges Franju are the outsiders of the cinema. Although they are occasionally spoken of together, they don't seem, at first glance, to have much in common. Vigo's films are accepted classics of the cinema and his place in its history is assured. Bunuel is still dismissed by some critics as a director with an unhealthy preoccupation with violence and human perversion. Though he became known in France at the same time as Vigo, most of his films have been made in Mexico since 1945. Franju seems a very contemporary director. His first film, *Le Sang des Betes*, was made in 1948 and his first feature, *La Tete contre les Murs*, was not made until 1958.

For all their differences in background, Vigo, Bunuel and Franju have one thing in common. They were all formed in the climate of surrealism. In an interview in *Cahiers du Cinema* (reprinted in *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1955) Bunuel said, "It was surrealism that revealed to me that, in life, there is a moral path man cannot refuse to take. Through surrealism I discovered for the first time man isn't free. I believed in the total liberty of man but surrealism showed me a discipline to follow. It was one of the great lessons of my life, it was a marvellous, poetic step forward."

Talking of Bunuel and Dali's surrealist film *Un Chien Andalou*, Vigo said, "It was a capital work from all points of view: certainty of direction, perfect science in the visual and ideological associations, the solid logic of dreams, an admirable confrontation of the subconscious and the rational. . . . From the angle of a social subject, it is a precise and courageous film." And Franju has told how in the late 1920s he discovered the twin gods of surrealism, Freud and the Marquis de Sade. The influence of surrealism is present in all their films and is mainly responsible for the common themes in their work.



# ONE

Jean Vigo is the most obvious candidate for the description of 'anarchist'. He had a very orthodox anarchist background. His father, Almereyda, was the editor of an anarchist newspaper who died while serving a prison sentence for his opposition to the first world war.

Vigo spent a good deal of his life in Nice and his first film, *A propos de Nice*, is at its best in the attack he makes on the life of the 'internationally idle' class there. There is no doubt how much Vigo hates these people.

The tone of *A propos de Nice* is established very early on when the camera makes a fast track forward along the promenade. As it does, so, people hurriedly get out of the way. We do not think the director is clumsy to call our attention to the camera. Immediately we sense that Vigo is using the camera like a weapon—people are very wise to get out of its way. For the rest of the film, Vigo is like a saboteur in enemy territory, darting amongst people, holding them long enough for a shot to make its point, and then darting away as people spot him.

Vigo has a superb eye for detail to go with this use of the camera. The people he fixes on, rich men and women, ugly, old and expensively dressed, suggest their class and its characteristics perfectly. His incidental observations of the corruption of life in this class are revealing; an old man eyes the legs of a girl opposite him and then undresses her in his mind; a man sunbathing on the beach seems to burn to death; a human face appears behind bars in the grill at the bottom of a monster doll. Vigo senses the hysteria in the Nice Carnival, the ugly, monster dolls, the flowers being thrown at a raddled old woman, and the frenzy of the dancing girls. He 'pins down' this hysteria by keeping the camera right on top of people so that movement inside the frame is emphasised.

Part of the force of Vigo's attack on the rich depends on the contrast he makes between them and the poor of the town. The poor, the young men at work, the old men standing and talking, the women washing, have a grace and

an innocence. And yet the contrast doesn't work. The cutting between the two classes is so automatic that they never seem to belong to the same world and the comparison feels imposed from outside the film. (The anarchists have always been partly Marxist in outlook and *A propos de Nice* reflects a crude Marxist attitude to class.)

Vigo's criticism is not only directed against the rich and the idle of Nice. He connects them with the established institutions of society, which he attacks with the same vigour. Priests and a funeral procession are made ridiculous by being shot in fast motion. The nature of armies is suggested by cutting between an army procession (seen in a high, long shot which makes the procession look like one of toy soldiers) and the statues that brood over a cemetery (seen in single close ups to emphasise them). There is a final prediction of the collapse of this society as Vigo cuts between the faces of rich old women and tall chimneys, belching smoke and flame. Vigo was explicit about this general attack. Of the film he wrote, "By displaying the atmosphere of Nice and the kind of lives lived down there—and, alas, elsewhere—the film illustrates the last gasps of a society whose neglect of its responsibilities makes you sick and drives you towards revolutionary solutions."

All of Vigo's films came from a direct response to his own experience. *Zero de Conduite* is partly a realistic criticism of the kind of school where he had suffered as a boy. Again, it is also a general statement about society. As one might expect from the director of *A propos de Nice*, the realistic criticism is very precise. The school is a forbidding place with its cramped and grimy classrooms, its dusty playground and its dreary food. Except in the case of one master, there is no genuine relationship between the staff and the boys. The headmaster is a tyrannical dwarf. His assistant abases himself before all authority and creeps round the school furtively spying on the boys. The science master is a gross man with sly homosexual inclinations while the school caretaker is an anonymous figure in dark glasses. The boys are rebellious, suspicious and wild. They are beautifully created in a playground sequence, as they play games, smoke in the lavatory, and plot.

The school is not simply a school for Vigo. He suggests that it is an image of the general set-up of society. For him society is divided into two groups, the rulers and the ruled,



between whom there is an absolute gulf. The rulers behave tyrannically and try to terrorise the ruled. But the ruled represent forces too mysterious and too powerful for the rulers to control. Rebellion is the inevitable outcome.

The general implication works best in terms of the authorities. Their representative quality emerges naturally from the care with which Vigo creates them on a realistic level. The assertive dwarf, the creeping assistant headmaster, the anonymous caretaker are types common to all authority. The odd, surrealist images in the presentation—the sudden screaming outburst by the headmaster at Tabard, the dummies who make up the second row of celebrities at the school ceremony—only help to sharpen the general suggestion.

The boys are less satisfactory on this level. This is odd because into their creation, Vigo put all his humour, passion and inventiveness. Two sequences marvellously illustrate these qualities. In the opening sequence of the film, two boys are returning by train to school. Outside the carriage they are travelling in, clouds of smoke billow. Inside the boys produce games, false thumbs, balloons and feathers. They puff at cigarettes. There is an air of magic and mystery about this which the music adds to. When the train stops, a man who has been sleeping undisturbed in the corner of the carriage slumps onto the floor. "He's dead" says one of the boys unbelievably and we almost believe him. The second sequence is the boys' revolt which James Agee has described very nicely as "a dormitory riot and procession, bearing a crucified teacher through a slow motion storm of pillow feathers, which combines Catholic and primordial rituals and as an image of millennial, triumphal joy has only been equalled on film, so far as I know, by newsreel shots of the liberation of Paris."

Despite this, the boys do not convince on this level of the film because when he wants to use them to suggest the mysterious powers of the ruled, Vigo moves into a world of dream and fantasy which doesn't connect with the realistic level. The two sequences already mentioned are clear evidence of this. And almost every act of defiance and rebellion by the boys takes place in the dormitory late at night with connotations of dream, from the scene where the boys stand outside the master's cubicle to the final rebellion. Even the last sequence of the film, which has a realistic setting, also has a



Zero de Conduite

strong element of fantasy. The four boys throw boots, chamber pots and other objects at the authorities. There is no sense that this attack fundamentally upsets the authorities, they are merely irritated. The boys do not complete the revolution but disappear over the roofs, singing, into a fantasy future. At the most, it has been guerrilla warfare. The status quo has been disturbed but not overthrown.

Vigo's last film, *L'Atalante*, is either described as his best or dismissed as a retreat into the pessimistic indulgence that Carné and Prevert were later to exploit. The film opens realistically enough with a long slow sequence of Jean and Juliette's wedding. As the wedding procession moves slowly from the church, over waste ground, to the barge, Vigo makes us aware that marriage is taking Juliette from a tight, interwoven community that she has never been outside before. This is confirmed when *L'Atalante* leaves and the camera moves slowly over the sad group assembled on the shore. But the sequence is also touched with humour as Pere Jules and the boy desperately rush to the barge, and drop the bouquet of flowers, with which they had meant to welcome the skipper and his wife, overboard.



Once the barge moves away from the village, Vigo creates a world that is almost as fantastic as the boys' world in *Zero de Conduite*. Most of the action takes place on the barge, which, with its small rooms and isolated community life becomes a world in itself. *L'Atalante* is an almost fairy tale story of love in this private world. The beginning is full of the delight of newly-married love. Jean, Pere Jules and the boy serenade Juliette as she emerges into the morning air; Jean and Juliette mock wrestle and then steal away as Pere Jules demonstrates a 'Greco-Roman' wrestling hold. Life has a passion and a purity. But it is a delight that doesn't last. Jean and Juliette begin to quarrel and disagree.

Juliette (a beautiful performance by Dita Parlo) is a complete innocent with an excitement about every new experience. She is thrilled at the prospect of visiting Paris. She is fascinated by Pere Jules and his extraordinary collection of toys and mementoes. She is curious about the pedlar with his tricks and charm. Jean is the opposite, unimaginative, preoccupied with day to day affairs and suspicious of new people and experiences. The difference between them is charmingly pointed in the scene where Juliette tells Jean that, under water, you can see the face of your loved one. He cannot do so. His jealousy grows. When he finds Juliette with Pere Jules he smashes up Pere Jules' cabin. When he sees Juliette happily dancing with the pedlar, he angrily snatches her away and takes her back to the barge. When he discovers she is not on the barge he casts off without her.

Vigo communicates all this with rare zest. Pere Jules is an incredible character. For all his age, his slovenliness and his bad manners, he is a primitive innocent. This innocence is established by his loving care of the cats, his schoolboy collection of souvenirs, his theft of the gramophone. But the strength of this innocence comes through by the way he takes care of the pining Jean when he has been separated from Juliette, and by the fact that he finds Juliette in the end. The pedlar is almost as remarkable a creation with his complete effrontery (the way he steals Juliette from Jean and dances with her) his inventiveness (his display of wares and the one man band). Sequence after sequence amazes us by the evidence it gives of Vigo's visual delicacy and invention; the arrival in Paris where lighting and physical movement combine to capture the exhilaration of

the arrival; Juliette stares with rapture into the lighted window of a large Paris shop; an extraordinary cross cutting sequence when the separated lovers go to bed, which communicates a painful sense of sexual loss that is unique in the cinema; Jean rushes along a deserted beach towards an empty horizon or suddenly sees an image of Juliette as he swims under water.

Although this world with its innocence and wonder, loss and sadness is the centre of the film, it is not the only world. There is another quite different one, a world of unemployment, violence, ugliness and theft. Vigo creates this world finely. He consistently suggests it with the images of life on the river bank, the docks with black foreboding cranes and machinery, the desolate railway lines and the waste land. It comes across startlingly in the sequence where Juliette is the victim of a thief. As she wanders in a railway booking hall, a thin faced, stunted man steals her handbag. She watches with horror as a crowd of people chase him like a hunting pack. He is trapped by some railings, almost bounces back from them, and cowers as the crowd attack him. There is an almost physical crunch as the crowd come on him. Then a fast track along some railings shows the thief on the other side being brutally dragged away by policemen.

Although all this is strongly presented it has little connection with life on the barge. The two worlds co-exist without ever meeting. Juliette, who comes closest to life in the 'other' world, is only a spectator. And her absence from the barge is temporary. At the end of the film she returns to the barge and her love. This inability to bring the worlds together accounts for an uncertainty one feels about the end of the film. *L'Atalante* is primarily a story of re-united love and it has a conventional, though convincing, happy end. Yet there is an undertow in the film which cannot be located in the main story. It comes mainly from the images of the 'outside' world and partly from odd surprising detail like the cats who claw at Jean and Juliette when they make love and the scarifying face of the toy orchestra conductor. There is a sense in *L'Atalante* that the 'real' world is weighing down the world of innocence. Almost literally for Vigo the last shot of *L'Atalante* is an image of a death ship.



## TWO

**And do you think that people always understand your intentions? That the public gets what you are driving at? The other day a neighbour of ours, a chap I hardly know, stopped my wife in the street and said, "Madame Franju I must congratulate you. I saw your husband's film on Notre Dame at the Regent. It was marvellous, all those empty chairs. You can tell that M. Franju is a good Catholic, he's pointing out that all those chairs are going to be filled with thousands of people who've come to pray." What can you make of that? I must say the Catholics have a very vivid imagination.**

Georges Franju—Interview in *Cahiers du Cinema*

Because of his strong social conscience and because of the subjects he chooses, Georges Franju is too often regarded simply as a director of social exposés. Penelope Gilliat made a classic statement of this attitude to Franju's work when, reviewing his feature film, *La Tete contre les Murs*, in *The Observer*, she wrote, "... the director's eye is poetic and angry. His film is, in fact, an eloquent plea for the very provisions that are made in our own new Mental Health Act, and I should not have thought that psychiatrists need feel angry about its effect on public opinion, since it can only cement the sympathy that impelled the act." In this way, Franju is cut down to the critic's size. He becomes a conventional progressive like all the rest of us. To suggest that Franju's work makes a consistent statement about society, a statement that is inspired by a hatred of all institutions must seem ridiculous to such critics. To suggest that *Le Sang des Betes*, a film about an abattoir, makes this kind of statement must seem the height of absurdity.

The exposé element in *Le Sang des Betes* is easy to see. In a very direct and simple style, working almost entirely

in close up and medium shot, Franju shows the operations of a slaughter house. It is not a pretty sight. We see every detail of the killing of a horse; the gun put to the horse's head, the horse leap as the gun is fired, and then fall dead. Sheep have their throats cut. Calves kick their legs after they have been slaughtered. Blood is pumped out of dead animals; their organs are swiftly cut away.

At this level the film is powerful enough, but Franju isn't only working on this level. He constantly points to the wider implications of what we are seeing. The film opens with a title 'At the gates of Paris.' There we see all kinds of odd things, an umbrella, a picture, an old gramophone, an abandoned clothes dummy, a man sitting at a huge table in the open air. Franju uses these objects to create a sense of spontaneity and charm. Once we move inside Paris, the spontaneity and charm goes. Franju's images suggests that the organised purposeful city has no place for such qualities. A number of railway cattle trucks, shot with a slightly tilted camera, look dark and menacing and suggest the cattle trucks that were used to convey people to the concentration camps. Lorries and cars have the same menace. Buildings, black against the skyline, add to the threat. Then we go into the slaughterhouse. But Franju keeps coming out to remind us of the atmosphere he has created. The threat is always there right to the very last image of the train puffing out in the midst of enormous clouds of black smoke.

The parallel with the concentration camps that the shot of the cattle trucks suggests is added to throughout the film. It is made explicitly in the commentary. Sheep arrive at the slaughter house in a light that suggests very early morning and recalls the early morning secret police calls and executions. The men who kill the animals are ordinary and go about their work in a matter of fact way—just like concentration camp guards. And Franju makes it clear that all this is relevant to us. In one sequence, a cow is cut open as a clock strikes. Franju cuts to some typical shots of city life, cars moving, people walking. But the booming clock is still heard and links the shots with the previous shots of the slaughter house. It is an exact filmic equivalent of John Donne's 'No man is an island.'

In *Hotel des Invalides*, Franju is also concerned with the institution that menaces and destroys life. In this case



he is able to make his point very explicitly since the institution is a war museum. The film has a similar structure to *Le Sang des Betes*. It opens with a sequence of charm and nostalgia. The camera tours Paris, sees familiar sights like the Eiffel tower and the Place de la Concorde. It notes odd details, an old man playing a barrel organ, children running by the Seine as a barge passes. Although the sequence has great charm, the heavy and oppressive lighting hints at the mood of what is to come.

From this there is a cut to a shot of a veteran soldier being pushed in a wheel chair across the courtyard of the Invalides. As Franju cuts into a close up of the man's nervously quivering face, the mood of the film changes. Franju takes us on a tour of the war museum and everything in it has an emotional charge for him. A cavalryman seen in front from a low angle shot seems ready to rise over us; an elongated bayonet glistens and threatens; the camera spots a suit of armour that was used for a child of eleven; in long shot three figures cross the line of fire of a model aircraft and on the soundtrack we hear the noise of bullets being fired; as a guide's voice rings proudly out 'The Emperor' there is a shot of a pathetically small figure of Napoleon; trees in the grounds of the museum are leafless and their branches cut short; abandoned black tanks and guns are only another reminder of death; the sound of a bird singing emphasises the absence of life. All this is contrasted with signs of fresh spontaneous life. A girl combs her hair in the mirror of a moviescope that will a moment later show a newsreel of the slaughter of the first world war. A little girl hops happily out of the place to be followed by a soldier with a wooden leg.

The climax of the film is a sequence in the church of the Invalides. The war veterans, who live in the building attend a service. By filming the priest at the altar in long shot, with the organ music of the service on the sound track, Franju captures the magnificence of the religious ceremony. He then moves into close ups of the soldiers; one man's face twitches uncontrollably; another has no arms; a man with a chestful of medals has a smashed face; a man who can't move from his wheelchair carries a flag on which is inscribed 'Paradise lies in the shadow of sabres'. The ugliness and directness of the close ups now make the magnificence of the

church service seem empty and blasphemous. The final image of the film drives home Franju's point. Children singing cheerfully are marching from the light towards a long dark avenue. Above them the birds circle and circle.

Franju gets most of his effects in *Hotel des Invalides* by his attention to detail. Even the smallest detail has an important place in the film. At one point the camera tracks between rows of dummy cavalymen. There is a familiar, popular war song 'See them pass by, those dragoons, those hussars, those guardsmen'. Franju puts the words at the bottom of the screen like sub-titles. Instead of humming them unthinkingly we realise what, in fact, they say. In the context of the blank faces of the dummies and the general atmosphere of the museum, the jaunty sentiments of the song seem macabre.

This attention to detail allows Franju to make a larger statement. *Hotel des Invalides* develops in a fairly strict historical order. In his precise references to names, battles and wars, we have an intimate sense of the French military tradition. The great halls of the Invalides and all they contain become an image for that tradition. It is an image of empty magnificence, of pomp and ceremony, but most of all, of death.

*Hotel des Invalides* and *Le Sang des Betes* are undoubtedly Franju's finest documentary films, but at least three others are worth mentioning. *En passant par la Lorraine* for its vision of a steel plant as a hell on earth. *Le Theatre Nationale Populaire* for the way it creates the mystery of the theatre. And *Notre Dame, Cathedral de Paris*, for an impression of the cathedral which is very similar to Franju's impression of the war museum.

In his features, Franju uses the same methods as his documentary films. He makes a precise documentary observation of the subject in such a way that he can make a general statement. In *La Tete contre les Murs* and *Eyes without a Face* he takes hospitals as an image of the struggle against power and violence. The weakness of both features as compared with the documentaries is their lack of coherence. This is less so of *La Tete contre les Murs*, in which there are passages of remarkable insight.

The atmosphere of a mental hospital is powerfully com-



municated. When Francois first comes into the hospital's eating hall he enters a world of blank faces and unintelligible noises. He sees a man being forcibly fed and meets a crazed nobleman, a resigned epileptic, a shocked soldier and a blind man who can see. The abnormality of this life is made clear when a crowd of ordinary, everyday people come into this place of strange sounds, locked doors and bored janitors. The contrast is focussed when Stephanie, Francois's girl friend, wanders round the hospital searching for Francois, nervously looking over walls and peering round corners. As well as the horror, the melancholy of the situation is also communicated in the images of the patients' life, like the men playing basket ball in an uncontrolled and unco-ordinated way or the little group of men who hold hands and move in a sad circle. The nature of authority is established through the portrait of the head doctor, whose love of power has made him as much a prisoner of the institution as the patients.

The film is at its best in the general statement it makes about freedom and the threat of the institution. Particular images always force us to extend our idea of the hospital. The aristocrat and the military man whom Francois first meets there suggest it is a refuge for victims of French history. The anonymity of the head doctor and the obvious sympathy he has with Francois' lawyer father makes him a representative of all local authority. He could be a judge, a politician, a civil servant—any kind of powerful bureaucrat. The impersonality of the assistants in their uniform white coats adds to the suggestion. Freedom is delicately suggested. As Francois and the epileptic travel on the hospital's miniature railway, the camera almost caresses the wild foliage that they see in passing. When Francois talks to his father, the voices of school girls singing happily and unconcernedly as they pass the hospital, are heard on the sound track.

The formal properties of the images are very important in the film. Throughout there is an emphasis on circles; the searchlight moves round the walls; the artificial ponds are circular; men exercise by walking round in a circle; a water sprinkler moves in a slow circle; and the billiard ball circles round the hole. In this way the sense that

Francois has of not being able to break out is in the very texture of the film.

The last third of *La Tete contre les Murs* is worth describing in some detail for it is an almost perfect statement of Franju's intentions. The epileptic, who has been prevented from escaping from the hospital by a sudden fit, sits musing by an artificial pond. The shot suggests both his great ambition to go to sea and its impossibility. He talks to himself about ships and the sea and murmurs that some ships escape by going to the bottom of the sea. The next sequence is a church service which, in the contrast between the pomp of the ceremony and the faces of the patients, recalls the church service in *Hotel des Invalides*. In the middle of the service a woman patient sings a lament which seems to be for the assembled patients. The head doctor is called away from the church. The oppressiveness of the service is relieved by a shot of the men walking along a small country road with trees moving gently in the wind behind them. But it is a deceptive image for the men enter another building to discover that the epileptic has hanged himself. The place gives, significantly, a hint of the controlled violence of organised life. It is the power room of the hospital and Franju carefully picks out a notice that warns of the dangers of electric shock. The head doctor is visibly shaken by this final assertion of a man's freedom. "He was the nicest of them all" he remarks bewilderedly. A short sequence follows which consists only of four shots of the hospital grounds at late evening time. There is no sign of life in the shots and they are all presented in terms of advancing shade over light. It is a moving visual anthem for the dead man.

At the funeral service which follows, Franju again suggests the conflict between freedom and the institution by the shots of the small funeral group moving towards a cemetery. They are taken from inside a field, catch some horses as a detail in the frame, and see the funeral party across a barbed wire fence. Inside the cemetery he emphasises that death is the logical end to institutional life by shooting the funeral party moving slowly among the rows and rows of neatly ordered graves and crosses. The music, a repetition of the theme associated with the epileptic, interrupted by a clanging funeral bell, adds tremendously to the



mood of the scene. (Maurice Jarre has contributed the music for a number of Franju's films. Each time he has made a very creative contribution, a contribution which marks him out as the most creative musician working in the cinema.)

Francois' escape is by way of a nice irony. He pushes the guardian assistant into the grave. The shot of him fleeing from the hospital makes his fate clear, though. A lonely figure runs through a line of fire towards an horizon grey and heavy with cloud. When he arrives in Paris there is no sense of safety. His terror at the confusion of a large city is caught by the high, long shot of the small figure amongst the swiftly moving traffic and the flashing neon signs whilst on the soundtrack, Jarre's discordant music blares. Inside a billiard saloon, Francois watches the blank fixed faces of the spectators as they stare at a billiard ball circling slowly and almost agonisingly round till it comes to rest in a hole. Madness isn't only confined to mental hospitals!

Finally, Francois goes to Stephanie's flat. The tenderness of the love scene (beautifully played by Jean Pierre Mocky and Anouk Aimee) is a reminder of one of the values of freedom. How well the detail of the film is organised is shown by a small incident in this sequence. As they make love, Francois undoes Stephanie's belt. Franju brings this to our notice by deliberately cutting back from the couple so we see the gesture clearly. It seems to mean more than we see in the incident itself. The meaning comes, of course, from the fact that this is the first time in the film that formally a circle is broken. The sense of release in the sequence only lasts for a short time. When Francois leaves the flat, the police are waiting for him. He is violently siezed and put into a car. The searchlight circles the walls, the drum beats. Although the last image of the film shows the gates of the hospital closing on Francois, the struggle is still on, we sense.

The lack of coherence in *La Tete contre les Murs* is easy to locate. It comes from our uncertainty about Francois. The credit sequence, where he drives his motor bike violently and aimlessly and nearly knocks a small child over, his attempt to get money out of the middle aged woman, his burning of his father's papers, establish him as a violent, possibly insane person. The realistic explanation of his

behaviour—he thinks he saw his father kill his mother when he was a child—is unconvincing. It is communicated in flat dialogue sequences between Francois and the head doctor and in any case there is little sense of personal relationship between Francois and his father. The explanation works better on a poetic level. When Francois explains his behaviour to his father by saying "You would come home from court and show how the case you had just won could be argued completely the other way . . . you said society was a game, you had to know the rules," the explanation convinces. It connects up with the detail of the film—the papers Francois burns are important legal papers—and with the statement about institutions and authority that the film makes.

There is a further uncertainty in Francois' character. All the signs of his possible insanity occur before he is put in the mental hospital. Once inside there is an abrupt change and he becomes a gentle, sympathetic and normal person. How are we to take him then? There is one moment in the film when a clear pronouncement should be made on his sanity. That is when his father calls a doctor to get him committed to a mental hospital. Franju avoids the pronouncement by cutting directly from the father picking up the telephone to Francois being taken to the hospital in a car so we never know what the doctor's attitude was. The evasion has important consequences for the film. Life in the hospital is seen entirely through Francois' eyes. Since his character isn't clear, it's hard to judge the value of what he sees—a sane man would see the hospital very differently from an insane man. As has already been mentioned, Francois is a very sympathetic person when he is in the hospital. This simplifies the realistic situation to a man wrongfully incarcerated and the general situation to good people versus bad institutions. Franju has avoided the complex judgement that the early part of the film demands. What is his attitude to the idea of locking Francois up even though he may be insane? And what does he make of a society which both creates the conditions for insanity and then punishes the victims of those conditions? And there is one other very important effect of Francois' change of character. At the beginning of the film although he behaves irrationally, his very irrationality makes him a threat to



authority. In the later part of the film he is so gentle that he presents no threat and becomes simply a victim.

*Eyes without a Face* has much the same theme as *La Tete contre les Murs* and a similar setting. The threat comes from a dominating surgeon (again played by Pierre Brasseur) and the setting is a hospital, though this time it is a medical one. Superficially it is a more coherent film than *La Tete contre les Murs*. It has the neat script one would expect from Boileau—Najerac and no major inconsistencies. It also seems more optimistic. The doctor is destroyed by the forces he has himself created and the chief victim, his own daughter, escapes. (When Franju was asked why the film didn't end conventionally with the police solving the mystery he simply said "I don't like the police.")

But the creative tension which gave *La Tete contre les Murs* so much of its force is missing from *Eyes without a Face*. The realistic observation has degenerated into scattered, disconnected images. Some of these are still powerful. An old man whose daughter's dead body has just been identified by Dr. Genessier as Genessier's daughter is caught in the beam of Genessier's headlight in a ghostly setting of criss crossing railway bridges and tunnels. Christine wanders freely and inconsequentially through the house picking up odd objects then phoning her fiancé and listening as he says "hullo" without answering because he thinks she is dead. A sick boy's face is blank as he can't count the fingers the doctor holds up to him. But these don't add up to anything complete. There is no sense at all of life in the hospital and much of the film might have been made by a good routine film-maker.

*Eyes without a Face* is full of themes that the structure cannot justify or contain. Throughout there is a sense of uncontrolled violence, expressed primarily through the doctor and his experiments. This violence is also in the texture of the film with its speedy shining cars and hurtling trains that make up so much of the detail. The central relationship between the doctor, his daughter and his assistant is obscure. There are dialogue suggestions that the assistant is Genessier's mistress but no other evidence. The description of the assistant contains hints of lesbianism. She stands, a large figure in a shiny, black mackintosh, watching the dead body of a girl

covered only with a coat float down the river. She combs Christine's hair with an almost sensual tenderness. The film throws up enough hints for one to speculate endlessly about this relationship. Is the relationship between father and daughter an incestuous one on his part? Does the savagery with which Christine stabs the assistant in the throat (the place where there is still a mark of the father's operation on her) reveal her jealousy of the relation between the assistant and her father? All these questions are raised by the film but all the evidence is too slight or too contradictory for one to even begin to discuss the answers.

One should be careful about attributing responsibility to Franju for all this. Boileau—Najerac are specialists in the horror genre and *Eyes without a Face* contains many of the classic elements of the horror story. You don't need to be an expert psychologist to sense that all of the usual elements of horror invite symbolic, psychological explanations. Franju's responsibility lies in the fact that he is enough of an artist to see this but not, in *Eyes without a Face* at least, enough of an artist to control it.

Nor is *Eyes without a Face* an optimistic film. Although the doctor is destroyed by the dogs his daughter releases, she makes no real escape. The last shots of the film see her wandering off into the woods, carrying a white dove. Both the figure of the girl in the long flowing nightdress and the dove suggest that the escape is into madness. (Franju has said that white doves always represent madness for him.) Throughout the film Christine is a completely submissive figure with no force at all. In this she is a contrast with Francois in *La Tete contre les Murs* who has strength enough at least to suggest that he will go on fighting.

It is perhaps significant that a film which is so full of unexplained hints and suggestions, should on a plot level be such a private film. The hospital is a private hospital, miles from Paris and cut off from the world by a curtain of trees. The doctor's operations take place in the private wing of the private hospital. Even then they occur in secret rooms and operating theatres. Christine lives in secret rooms at the top of the house. One has the feeling that the public anxiety of *La Tete contre les Murs* has become a private nightmare in *Eyes without a Face*.



## THREE

**We divert our attention from disease and death as much as we can; and the slaughter houses and indecencies on which our life is founded are huddled out of sight and never mentioned, so that the world recognised officially is a poetic fiction."**  
William James

The mention of surrealism usually brings to mind a film full of incomprehensible and often unpleasant images so it is surprising that one's first impression of *L'age d'or* is of a realistic film. Bunuel establishes his settings in an objective documentary style from the first scene on the sea shore when Rome is founded to the scenes in the mansion where the party takes place. Throughout the film the precise setting of the action is never in doubt. The surrealist images are added onto this realistic structure—Lya suddenly finds a cow on her bed, a cart driven by two workmen crosses a room where a party is going on, a man kicks a violin along a street and then steps on it. Bunuel uses these images partly to disturb our sense of reality and partly as integral dramatic symbols. So when Lya discovers the cow on her bed, our certainty that we are viewing a familiar world is shaken. On another level, the cow is a symbol of Lya's maternal needs. She sees it when she is thinking of Modot and the cowbell continues on the soundtrack as an accompaniment to all her thoughts of him. In the same way, the maid who rushes into the room and collapses as the flames belch out from behind her shakes us and also suggests the coming disintegration of the bourgeois world that the party guests represent.

The situation described in these terms is very similar to the central situation of Vigo's and Franju's films—the conflict between a corrupt and repressive society and the forces it denies, in Bunuel's case, love. Bunuel observes very force-

fully the nature of established society. In the opening sequence he shows its pomposity and stupidity in the contrast between the formally dressed dignitaries and the barren rocky beach they walk along, as if they were in a town hall. Its repressiveness is established by the way Modot and Lya are prevented from making love with Modot being roughly dragged off by the police. Its decadence is made apparent in the party, partly by Bunuel's direct observation of the atmosphere; the blank and stupid faces, the meaningless chatter, the empty good manners. Partly it is established by people's reactions to the incidents that occur during the party. They take no notice of the horse and cart that crosses the room. The maid collapsing does not disturb them. They are momentarily put out by the sight of the gamekeeper shooting his son down brutally when a moment before he has been tenderly playing with him but they soon resume the party as if nothing had happened. They are only really aroused when Modot offends against social etiquette by slapping the face of a woman who has spilt a drink over him. Even then, they forget about it and Modot is able to rejoin the party and meet Lya.

Modot is a powerful and aggressive personality symbolising the force of love that society rejects or corrupts. His and Lya's passionate love-making interrupts the solemn foundation ceremony. When he is parted from Lya everything reminds him of her, an advertisement for women's stockings, a shop window. His frustration leads him to kick dogs and attack blind men. At the party when he is prevented from going to Lya by a middle aged lady who makes conversation with him, he savagely hits her when she spills wine over him. He uses any method to consummate his love—when the detectives won't let him go, he scares them by producing credentials which prove him to be the representative of an important international organisation.

Bunuel's view of the conflict between love and society, for all its sense of violence, is a subtle one and draws part of its strength from using some of Freud's newly discovered ideas. When Lya and Modot make love in the garden, they do so at first joyfully and passionately, but as soon as the music begins (it is *Tristan and Isolde*) their love making becomes clumsy and awkward. As they embrace their heads collide, they can't find a comfortable position. Throughout





La Tete contre les Murs

Viridiana





the film Bunuel hints at the erotic quality of the music and in this sequence the music is clearly represented as sublimated sexuality. As soon as they hear it, Modot and Lya become the victims of their society's mores, and their passion is inhibited. It is no accident that Bunuel puts a priest in the orchestra whom he notes every time he returns to the orchestra. Each time the priest is grinning fiendishly. In the same way, when Modot is making love he catches sight of a near-by statue and this reminds him of a priest, whom we immediately see crossing a bridge. When Modot leaves Lya, she fiercely sucks the toe of a statue.

Bunuel makes the point—it is also Freud's—that culture is sublimated sexuality and as such it is an ally of the church. To emphasise the point, when Modot rushes off after Lya has left him for the aged orchestra conductor, the drum rolls on the sound track suggest a purposeful anger. But when he rolls on the bed in an indulgent agony, *Tristan and Isolde* returns. When he gets up and starts to throw a bishop, a giraffe, an enormous pine and a burning plough out of the window, the drum rolls start again. Modot has become a revolutionary.

This account may suggest that *L'age d'or* is more lucid than in fact it is. One of the weaknesses of the film is that there is an extraordinary force in it which cannot be located very precisely. The fault seems to be that the film is very dependent on certain ideas, particularly Freudian ones. Unless you have knowledge of the ideas, the film doesn't work for you. The ideas do not emerge directly out of the characters and situations. Indeed, occasionally, the characters and situations are only illustrations of the ideas. Because of this there is an uncertain sense of development in the film.

Bunuel's next film was *Land without Bread* (1932), a documentary about the people of the Las Hurdes district in Northern Spain. After this he was not to make another film until 1946, when he made *Gran Casino* in Mexico. This was a commercial chore that was offered him by the Mexican producer, Oscar Dancigers. Since it was a failure he didn't make another film very quickly. Then in 1949, he showed Dancigers the script of *Los Olvidados*. Dancigers liked it and agreed to produce the film. He offered Bunuel a degree of freedom in its making if he would first direct another commercial picture, *El Gran Calavera*. Bunuel

agreed and he got some, though not complete, freedom in the making of *Los Olvidados*.

Although it is separated from *Land without Bread* by 18 years, *Los Olvidados* has much the same spirit. Bunuel looks at the lives of the young people of the big city slums with the same honesty and directness that he viewed life in the isolated, barren mountains of the Las Hurdes. He sees the poverty that is the major fact of slum life; a mother cannot feed her young children properly; there is no work for the young people so they learn to scrounge and steal; blind men and cripples are features of the life; houses are no more than a room or two where everybody sleeps and eats promiscuously. Bunuel is not sentimental about the effects of this kind of life. It produces ignorance—people think illness is cured by a blind man stroking a sick woman with a dove. Most of all it leads to brutality. The boys who are prevented from robbing a blind man revenge themselves by setting on him when he is alone and destroying the musical instruments he plays to make a living. A man with no legs is pulled off the cart on which he propels himself and the cart is kicked away from him when he refuses to give the boys cigarettes. Julian is killed by having a brick hurled at the back of his head and then clubbed with a stick.

Bunuel records this in a very direct and simple style, working mostly in close up and medium shot and rarely resorting to long shots or odd camera angles. So there is no sense of neurotic excitement about violence which the angled shots and flashy cutting of a director like Nicholas Ray produces. Because of Bunuel's style, it is easy to miss his precise sense of location and his eye for the revealing detail. The sense of the barrenness and sterility of life in *Los Olvidados* depends very much on the squat, anonymously regular houses, the dust and the heat, the ruins, the rubbish heaps and the half finished buildings in the midst of which the action takes place. Detail is extraordinarily revealing; for example, two of the most brutal acts in the film take place in front of a huge construction of steel girders, which is an exact symbol of the violence and anonymity of life in a large modern city.

*Los Olvidados* is far from a simple account of how slum life produces degeneracy and brutality. The world that Bunuel creates contains a moral cross section of humanity



ranging from the complete innocence of Ochitos to the almost complete corruption of Jaibo. Between them come the girl Meche's family who have come to some kind of terms with life; Pedro's mother and her children who cannot cope with the situation; and the blind beggar, a representative of the reactionary forces in such a society. All are presented with great force and complexity. The simple image of Ochitos sucking milk directly from the cow's udder establishes his innocence perfectly. Meche has the same kind of innocence. It is in her relationship with Ochitos, in the lucky charm he gives her, in the way she washes herself with milk when told it will make her skin clean and smooth. The terms her family have come to with life are presented through their natural relationships with the animals they rear. Bunuel does not see them only as a picture of idealised innocence. Throughout he sees them in terms of the realistic context he has created. When the grandfather discovers Pedro's body in his loft he fearfully puts it in a sack and dumps it on a rubbish heap.

Pedro's mother is one of the most vivid characters Bunuel has created. Her sluttishness and insensitivity are established by her lack of sympathy for Pedro, through Jaibo's easy seduction of her. Her attractive features are just as strongly presented. Bunuel notes her sensual appeal in a shot of her washing her legs. He sees how she finally begins to respond to her son when he is put into a reformatory for a crime he didn't commit. In the final images of her walking the street with the black scarf pulled over her head, in a forlorn search for the boy who has just been killed, and whose body she in fact passes as it is being taken to the rubbish dump, she becomes a genuinely tragic figure.

The blind man is equally powerful. He is the most openly symbolic character in the film (though here again the symbolism is also contained in the realistic structure—we are always aware of him as a degenerate old man). His function is made clear by the final images he appears in. When he thinks that Jaibo has been in his room, he bars the door with a large plank. When the plank is across the door it forms a cross. The image hints both at the repressiveness of the reactionary forces and who those forces are. The suggestion is added to by the small white cross painted on the top panel of the door. When the police come for Jaibo, the blind

man, his face turned to the camera says "they should all be killed at birth."

*Los Olvidados* develops through the conflict between innocence and corruption which is primarily expressed in Pedro. At first sight Pedro is sympathetic. He is the first to make friends with Ochitos when he has lost his father. There is a very touching scene when Pedro comes on Ochitos late in the evening and takes him off to shelter for the night in Meche's stable. But under the twin pressures of his mother's rejection and Jaibo's influence, he is corrupted and finally destroyed. Bunuel beautifully works out Pedro's fate in terms of the animal symbolism. Throughout the film the animals represent the world of innocence. Their relation to Meche's family has already been mentioned. The animal loft in Meche's house is the one place where the boys can safely hide. In the opening of the film Pedro shows a great tenderness for the animals. The climax of his corruption is shown when he attacks the hens in the reformatory and brutally kills a number of them. Finally he is killed by Jaibo in the loft while the animals agitatedly squawk and flutter.

Pedro's relationship with his mother is equally well worked out. Although she is partly responsible for Pedro's downfall, Bunuel makes her partly sympathetic by the sense we have of a woman whose family raises too many problems and takes up too much of her energy for her to be able to find sympathy for the delinquent Pedro. Pedro's need for his mother is vividly suggested in the surrealist dream sequence when he and his mother fight for a large hunk of meat.

Pedro's relationship with Jaibo is less acceptable. The early relationship between the boys works. We sense the need of the guilty to corrupt the innocent and Jaibo does this by making Pedro an accomplice in the murder of Julian and by stealing a knife from the shop where Pedro has found work. The climax is not, however, worked out in terms of this relationship but by two coincidences. Jaibo happens to be outside the reform school when Pedro comes out with the money. And he is in the loft when Pedro comes to hide from him there. The difficulty is added to by an uncertainty about Jaibo. We know nothing of him and why he is so corrupt and brutal. The only hint comes at the end of the film when he is dying and there is an image of a pariah dog



advancing on him. On the sound track a voice, presumably his mother's, says "rest, my son." Does this mean that Jaibo like Pedro has been rejected by his family? As an explanation it is both too obvious and too faint to account for Jaibo's horrific acts.

Because Jaibo plays such an important part in the film (he has an effect on almost every important character) there is a sense that the world has much the same arbitrary brutal character as he does. It is easy to go from this to argue that *Los Olvidados* shows Bunuel to be a deeply pessimistic artist. I think this is a wrong conclusion. Although Pedro and Jaibo are killed, Meche and Ochitos survive. Innocence is not that easily destroyed. It is also wrong because, I suspect, that had Bunuel had complete control over the film he would have introduced elements that would have changed the temper of Jaibo's brutality. In the scene where the boys attack the blind man, for instance, the moment the blind man gets up he finds himself face to face with a chicken. The absurdity of this softens the brutality of what we have just seen and provides a natural link with the next shot of Pedro caressing a chicken in the loft. Bunuel has told how he wanted to introduce a lot more of this absurdity into the film. "Certainly Dancigers asked me to take out a number of things that I wanted to put in the film but he left me a certain freedom . . . everything he took out had a uniquely symbolic interest. Into the most realistic scenes I wanted to introduce some mad, completely disparate elements. For instance when Jaibo goes to beat up and kill the other boy, a camera movement reveals in the distance the framework of a huge eleven storey building under construction. I wanted to put an orchestra with a hundred musicians in that building. One would have seen it in passing vaguely. I wanted to put in many elements of that kind but it was absolutely forbidden." How this would have effected the film one can only guess. Since a great deal of the force of the film does depend on the tension between the realistic surface and the psychological undercurrents, it seems reasonable to suggest that it would have changed the unrelenting brutality the film now has.

*Los Olvidados* was a very powerful announcement of Bunuel's return to the cinema. After it one expected great things from him. But for eight years one's hopes were

disappointed. All the films he produced were marked with his authority but they were also flawed in important respects. The reasons for this are clear. The Mexican film industry (and later, the French, for that matter) offered Bunuel no freedom in his choice of subject and little freedom in his treatment of a subject once he had agreed to do it. And almost all of his films have been made very quickly. One of them, *El Bruto*, Bunuel says he made in eighteen days!

Of the films from this period I've seen (I've missed *El, Wuthering Heights* and *Cela s'appelle aurore*, all of which **are said to have some qualities**) only two seem worth mentioning—*Robinson Crusoe* and *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz*. In *Robinson Crusoe*, Bunuel draws a contrast between Robinson's growing mastery over nature and his growing inability to master himself. The way in which Robinson builds his home and stockade, how he learns to grow crops, to bake bread, to domesticate animals are all recorded by Bunuel in a simple documentary style that reveals his admiration for Robinson. Robinson's psychological problems are created in a number of evocative surrealist images. Two are especially remarkable. Sick with fever and burning of thirst, Robinson dreams of his father. His father turns out to be a waggish old man in an enormous red hat (suggestive of his bourgeois, Puritan background). Reproaching his son for "deserting the middle station" and going to sea, he refuses to give Robinson the water he so desperately wants. The image of the water being denied the son suggests both Robinson's immediate physical torment and the lack of any sympathetic understanding between father and son.

A little later in the film, Robinson, desperate for human company rushes to a valley of echoes and begins desperately to shout the 23rd Psalm. As the words "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" come bouncing back to him from the blank sides of the valley we know not only Robinson's distraught state but the anguish of man without God and without hope of any kind. Characteristically for Bunuel, Robinson becomes sane again when he discovers Friday. Bunuel has said that in the relationship he creates with Friday, Robinson joins "the great human brotherhood."

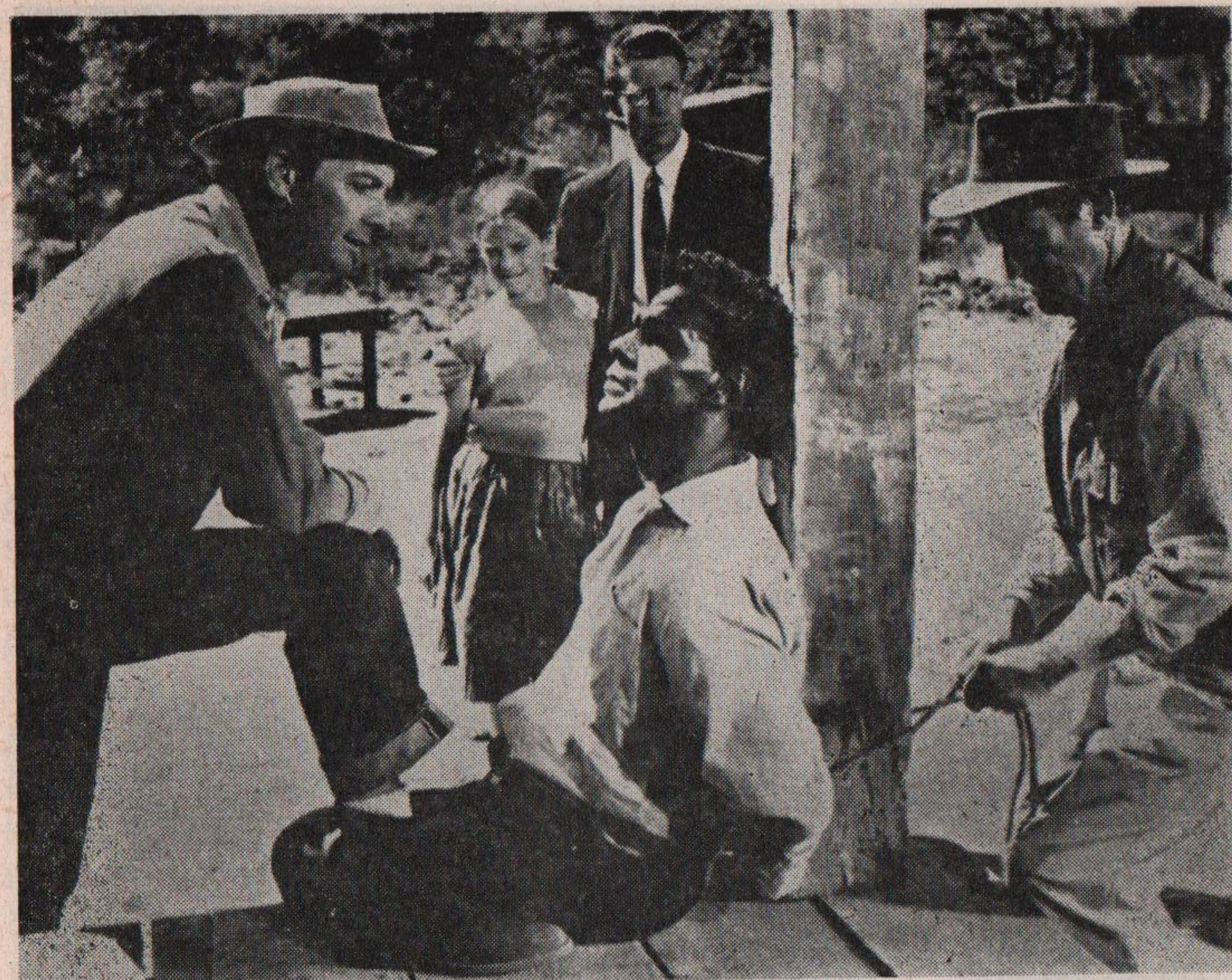
One of the strongest arguments against those who see Bunuel's work as black and pessimistic is the humour that is such an important and integral part of his films. *The*



*Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz* best represents this side of his talent. The comedy depends on the very delicate contrast Bunuel draws between the character of Archibaldo and the society he is a part of. As a result of events in his childhood, Archibaldo makes a firm connection between sex and death—he has an immediate desire to kill any woman who attracts him. Despite his criminal fantasies, Archibaldo is an innocent idealist. His shy good manners and his respect for women reveal his innocence. The careful way he plans his killings, lingering over each detail, show his idealism. Reality, in the shape of bourgeois society has no place for such innocence or idealism. His proposed killing of a society woman is interrupted by the return of her aged lover, who later jealously shoots her. His plan to kill his bride on their wedding night is foiled when her lover shoots her in the middle of the wedding reception. Even a nun he sets out to murder is accidentally killed when she falls down a lift shaft. Finally, Archibaldo is reduced to burning a dummy of one of the women he has met in order to work out his fantasies.

*Robinson Crusoe* and *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz* reveal a new direction in Bunuel's subjects. Nearly all of his later films centre on a conflict between one man, usually an idealist of some kind, and reality. In *Republic of Sin* it is a man of liberal principles trying to put them into operation in a totalitarian state. In *Nazarin* and *Viridiana*, a priest and a nun have their religious beliefs tested. *Nazarin* is a film of enormous power and the first film to satisfy completely the expectations that *Los Olvidados* had aroused. Unfortunately I have only seen the film once and that was four years ago which is hardly a good basis to discuss it. Luckily its theme is similar to *Viridiana's* and I think what I say about that film is relevant to *Viridiana*.

Between *Nazarin* and *Viridiana*, Bunuel produced *The Young One*. Coming immediately after *Nazarin* it was compared with it and found disappointing. It is certainly a minor film, lacking the power that distinguishes his major work and handicapped by inept acting. And yet in some ways it is the most satisfying film he has so far produced. In the film Bunuel explores two themes which he closely links, the maturing of a young girl and racialism. The young girl, Ewie, is one of Bunuel's innocents, very like Meche in *Los Olvidados*.



The Young One

Her innocence is established at a number of points in the film. Near the opening her father Pee Wee is buried. Miller, the gamekeeper and Jackson, one of Miller's friends from the mainland, reproach her when she puts a bottle of whisky on his grave. She replies indignantly "But he liked it." The same innocence is behind the complete unawareness of her own sensuality which she shows when Miller makes her sit on his knee or when the Negro finds her in the shower.

Her innocence is challenged by a number of crucial experiences. In the course of the film she learns about death (her father's), sex (Miller makes love to her), racialism (the conflict between the Negro and Miller and Jackson), and religion (the minister). Her most important experience is sex. Bunuel's great originality and sensitivity is made clear by the way he handles this experience. When Miller first makes love to Ewie (it would be wrong to call it a rape because it is not presented in that way), Bunuel records the action directly and matter of factly without any of the hysteria that is the usual response to the loss of virginity in our art and culture. The couple are seen through a window. Only





The Young One

their faces are lit, and this lighting creates an atmosphere of sensual tenderness. The only criticism of Miller comes from our sense that Ewie is not yet ready for such an experience, that she cannot properly share in it. In keeping with this, her only response is to refuse to wear the dress and high heels Miller has bought for her and to defiantly put on her own clothes and let her hair run wild.

Throughout the film there is a complex sense of Ewie both as an innocent child and as a maturing girl, which is finally summed up by one of the most beautiful images in

all of Bunuel's work. In long shot we see Miller, Jackson and the minister on a jetty which points to sea sparkling in the midday sun. Ewie comes walking painfully along the jetty in high heels. Suddenly she stops and starts to hop unconcernedly on one foot. She has become a child again and for one moment her gesture, the beautifully lit shot, and Bunuel's composition of the image combine to recall the innocence that she is both physically and spiritually leaving behind.

One of the great pleasures of *The Young One* is the perfect dovetailing of the major themes into the formal structure of the film. Ewie is the pivot and the reactions of all the other characters are tested against her. We share her disappointment when the gift the minister has been promising turns out to be baptism by ducking in a cold stream. Our judgment of the racial theme is made through her. When Miller won't let the Negro sit at the table and eat with him, she can't understand why anybody should behave in such an unnatural way. Both men are sexually attracted by her. Miller gives into his desire while the Negro realising she is immature holds back.

It is the ability to make fine human judgments of this kind that shows the Negro is superior to Miller and points to the absurdity of racialism. A great strength of the film is Bunuel's conception of the Negro. He is not the idealised primitive of *The Defiant Ones* variety. His ability to fend for himself practically is established by the facility with which he repairs his damaged boat; his sophistication by his understanding of the racial situation; his independence in the way he responds to Miller when the latter insults him. Unlike any other film about racialism, *The Young One* presents the Negro as the most *civilised* of the characters.

Throughout the film, the violence and tension created by racialism is in its texture. This is most apparent in two long encounters between the Negro and Miller, one by the Negro's boat and the other in front of Miller's house. In both cases the men stand at some distance from each other and hurl insults, with the remarks suddenly punctuated by outbursts of violence. The island location with its jungles, and swamps, its disturbing noises, its animal traps creates the same atmosphere (Gabriel Figueroa's camerawork is very important here but it should be said that occasionally, as



with all of Figueroa's work, it is too perfectly lit and composed).

As in all of Bunuel's films reality is not static in *The Young One*. The violence and tension of the texture of the film suggest it is a dynamic situation. By the end a certain comradeship has sprung up between Miller and the Negro and the final shot of the film sees Miller helping the Negro escape. Miller's change of heart does not come about for sentimental reasons but in a very natural and almost inevitable way. It comes about through his relationship with Ewie. In his attitude towards her, a certain tenderness develops after he has first made love to her. This is the first sign of any delicate human emotion that he shows. Inevitably it begins to destroy his racialism. When Jackson goes to hit Ewie for helping the Negro escape, Miller quickly stops him. Jackson knows why this is so. He knows what Miller's relationship with Ewie is—he has seen him go to her bed the night before. All this takes place in front of the minister who has been mainly concerned about Miller's relationship with Ewie. His suspicions of Miller are completely confirmed and he blackmails Miller to help the Negro. (Those critics who think that Bunuel is crudely anti-religious might look at the portrait of the minister. Despite a bad performance the portrait is complex. He is partly racist—he asks for the mattress the Negro has slept on to be turned over before he will sleep on it but he also shows a real determination in the way he forces Miller to help the Negro whom he knows is innocent.) Miller, partly because of the Minister's blackmail over his relationship with Ewie, and partly because of his hatred for the way Jackson has treated Ewie (Jackson is an even more bigoted racist than Miller was) agrees to do so.

Miller's racialism is like *Nazarin* or *Viridiana*'s religion—a defence against experience. The moment, through his relationship with Ewie, he becomes open to experience, like *Nazarin* and *Viridiana* his certainty is destroyed and his inverted idealism (racism) begins to crack. Even Jackson is a victim of the same dynamism. Miller's change puzzles him, the refusal of the Negro to kill him when the Negro has the upper hand in a fight disturbs him more. By the end of the film though he is still a racist, an element of doubt has crept in. It is this sense of people becoming open to experi-



Viridiana



ence that makes *The Young One* such a satisfying, if minor, film.

The credit sequence of *Viridiana*, a stark image of a detail of a Spanish village with the *Hallelujah Chorus* playing over it, challenges immediately and announces that *Viridiana* is a major work of Bunuel's. The story of how Franco invited Bunuel back to Spain and how Bunuel took this opportunity to make *Viridiana* is by now well known. In some ways this is unfortunate because it has given the film a misleading reputation as an anti-catholic and anti-fascist work. Certainly, the implications of *Viridiana* are anti-catholic and anti-fascist but to see it simply in these terms is to miss the subtlety of its insights. Bunuel sees how a fear of experience shores up totalitarianism. But he also sees how this fear creates a dynamic which destroys it.

Viridiana's refusal of experience is implicit in her vocation as a nun. The tone of a nun's life is very economically established in the film's opening shots when the mother superior tells Viridiana that her uncle wants to see her before she finally enters the convent. The sexuality behind Viridiana's fear comes across very directly in a sequence in the cow shed. An old farm hand invites Viridiana to milk a cow. In one of the most explicitly erotic images of the cinema, her hand reaches falteringly for the cow's hanging udder, takes it nervously in her fingers, and then with a nervous giggle she pulls away.

Although most of the film is concerned with describing how Viridiana's beliefs are destroyed, Bunuel always maintains a deep sympathy for her. He notes her sensuality in a beautiful image of her legs as she takes off her stockings. He admires the way she carries out her beliefs, the good humour with which she responds to all the beggar's provocations and her willingness to extend her charity to a man, whom even the beggars will not tolerate because he has the pox.

Viridiana's convictions are destroyed by way of what are really two set pieces in the film, her relation with her uncle and her attitude to the beggars. The uncle is another very sympathetic creation. Because of the traumatic shock of his wife's death on their wedding night, he, like Viridiana, has turned away from the world. His house has the same function as her convent. Bunuel suggests the nature of his life in a series of unobtrusive images in which we are made aware of the gloomy, musty house, of the deserted grounds, of the

absence of life. The atmosphere of this life is established by the constant shots of people's feet which catch the furtiveness and the enclosed feeling of the place. We sense the uncle's sexual torment as he watches the little girl skip under the tree, as he tries to fit his foot into one of his dead wife's shoes. We see how this is sublimated in his love of music—the cut directly from the shot of Viridiana's bare legs to the uncle rapturously playing the organ as the maid spies on Viridiana makes this clear (and reminds one of the same point that is made in *L'age d'or*). His torments are made explicit when he persuades Viridiana to put on his wife's wedding dress and then drugs her and tries to make love to her. Even after going so far he cannot conquer his inhibitions. In one startling image, Bunuel shows how the drugged Viridiana becomes for the uncle at the same time both a reminder of his dead wife and a kind of marble, religious statue. The film makes the result of this cult of purity and virginity obvious. As a result of these events the uncle commits suicide. The smile on his face as he writes his will suggests that this was an inevitable consequence.

Although Viridiana is profoundly shaken by these events she does not retire into the convent. She comes out into the world and decides to make her uncle's home a place of charity for the beggars of the village. Bunuel's attitude to the beggars shows the extraordinary respect for life he has. They are viewed very un sentimentally. They fight amongst themselves, they are dirty and brutal, they have no real respect for Viridiana and are only concerned to exploit her. They repay her kindness by staging an orgy when she goes away for the day. And yet they are also seen in terms of humour. It is in their shocked response to Viridiana's suggestion that they should work. It is in the way the blind man immediately assumes the role of a helpless beggar when Viridiana and Jorge, the bastard son, return to find the orgy taking place.

Bunuel uses the beggars as a profound criticism of the church. Their dirt and corruption, he suggests, are an inevitable response to the church's arrogant claims of innocence and purity. The beggars and the church are two sides of the same coin, inextricably linked together. Throughout the film, the beggars are closely connected with the church. The first shot of them shows them begging outside the village church. Their conversation is always full of references to the church. The story is told of how the pox



ridden man used to foul holy water by putting his hand covered with pox sores, in it. Finally in the orgy sequence, they attack all the symbols of purity we have seen in the film. Men and women dance grotesquely and make love to the accompaniment of the *Hallelujah Chorus*. They form themselves into an obscene parody of Leonardo's painting of *The Last Supper*. The blind beggar smashes everything in sight as the record plays "And he shall reign for ever and ever." The wedding clothes are trampled on. And the end comes when Viridiana is raped. "It had to come at some time" murmurs the poxy beggar. Bunuel's tight economical style catches the explosive nature of the orgy brilliantly.

The orgy sequence has usually been interpreted as a sign of Bunuel's blasphemous attitude to the church. But this is, surely, to miss the point. Bunuel is saying that such blasphemy is an inevitable consequence of the church's claims. An important detail of the orgy sequence shows that the beggars don't simply have Bunuel's approval. Throughout the sequence, two of the beggar's children are heard screaming and crying on the sound track. When a couple make love behind the sofa, the babies' faces, terrified and fearful, come into the shot. In the image there is a controlled anger at the neglect of the babies. Bunuel distances himself from the beggars in this manner. (In much the same way the servant's child witnesses all the important events in the film. She is a kind of commentator, a standard of normality in this abnormal world.)

The great doubt about *Viridiana* is the meaning of the end of the film. When Viridiana joins Jorge and his mistress at cards, it is not at all clear what our attitude to her should be. Is this the first sign of growth on her part? This is suggested both by the image of Viridiana looking into the mirror and letting her hair down and by the shot of the little girl burning the crown of thorns and the other relics of Viridiana's life as a nun. The rock and roll song which accompanies this has a certain humanity compared with the cold majesty of the *Hallelujah Chorus*. On the other hand, the image of Viridiana settling down to a card playing, rock and roll future with an easy going sensualist and his mistress has quite the opposite effect.

The ambiguity of the ending springs from deeper ambiguities in the film. It is never clear how we are meant

to take Jorge. On one level he is, with his directness and determination to make something of his uncle's estate, a refreshing contrast with the guilt ridden atmosphere created by Viridiana and her uncle. But strong criticisms are made of him. His relations with women are always presented in terms of a rather unpleasant dominance; he forces his first mistress to clean his boots for him; when he makes love to the servant, a cat leaps on a mouse as a metaphor of what is happening. Even in the sequence where Bunuel seems to be more explicitly on his side, in the cross cutting between the beggars praying and Jorge and the workmen altering the house, there is ambiguity. Almost every one of the images of the men working are destructive or images of violent movement; a hammer comes brutally down; logs are thrown on the ground; mortar is slapped against a wall, a lorry tips earth, stones are shaken in a sieve. There is a sense of energy in these images but it is not constructive energy. Although there is a great deal of talk about Jorge changing the house, there isn't an image in the film which shows us the changes. It is impossible to see *Viridiana* as a film which simply says that modern industrial ways are better than a feudal church set-up. Indeed the most tenable interpretation of Jorge's place in the film seems to be that he is the logical outcome of a church dominated society. The reaction against the spiritual arrogance of the church leads to men like Jorge, indulgent, with some energy, mixed with a certain destructiveness (after catholicism comes *la dolce vita*). Ambiguously though this is stated, it is one of the most profound insights in the film.

Our uncertainty about Viridiana's state at the end of the film really comes from an uncertainty about her development throughout the film. We see her outer reaction to the experiences she is a victim of but know nothing of her inner development. The first sign she has that the world is not as simple as she thinks it is, is her uncle's request that she should wear his dead wife's wedding clothes. Immediately a number of questions are raised about how a nun would react to such a request. But Bunuel doesn't answer the questions. We don't see Viridiana's immediate reaction. From the uncle making the request, Bunuel cuts directly to a shot of the house, taken from the grounds. Inside the house a light moves and when Bunuel cuts inside, Viridiana is wearing the wedding dress. We know what her answer was but not



why she gave this answer. The only clue is a line of dialogue which she speaks, "I'm only doing this because I like you, uncle." To understand Viridiana's subsequent development we need to know a great deal more about her state of mind. A little later the uncle hangs himself. Viridiana is brought by the police to see the hanging body. In the next shot of her she is scrubbing the floor of her room. When the Mother Superior comes in, she tells her she has decided not to go back to the Convent but to stay on the estate and do what good she can there. Again we don't know why she has reacted in this way to her uncle's suicide. Finally she is assaulted by the beggars. She is then seen with a dazed look sitting on the sofa. She gets up, looks at herself in the mirror, shakes her hair loose, and joins the card game. Again we want to ask, is this a natural reaction to an assault?

Bunuel has said of the film that Viridiana is not defeated, that at the end of the film she goes to the man she loves. One does half sense that the film has a predetermined end of this kind and that Bunuel uses reality, in the shape of the experiences Viridiana undergoes, as a kind of hammer to force her to this end. (There is a close parallel here with our dissatisfaction about the way Jaibo destroys Pedro in *Los Olvidados*.) Unless Viridiana is a special case (and all the signs are that Bunuel is making a general statement in the film) it seems very optimistic merely to assume that she would react in this way. We need a good deal more exploration of her attitudes before we could be convinced. But then Bunuel has always said that he is an optimist!

## FOUR

There is a very great danger in reducing a number of complex works of art to a label. But obviously some explanation of the use of the term anarchist to describe Vigo, Franju and Bunuel's films is necessary. The conflict which is at the heart of all their films best justifies the description. It is a conflict between the values of the established forces of society, like the church, the military, the bourgeoisie, etc., and

individual human values like freedom, love, spontaneity and growth. These are seen as directly contradicting each other and the contradictions are presented in terms of classical anarchist situations; boys rebel against the school authorities; a mental patient tries to escape from an asylum; a priest has his convictions destroyed.

As a result of this conflict the world is a dynamic one. In all of the films there is no sense of a fixed society which defines and places people. Society and the people in it are subject to pressures they only half understand and cannot control. As a result of this dynamism the world that Vigo, Franju and Bunuel create has a richness of texture. The central conflict effects everybody. The world is full of the victims and victors of the conflict in the sick and sexually perverted, the saints and the sinners, the innocent and the corrupt.

It is, however, necessary to make a distinction between the three artists. A final judgment on Vigo's and Franju's art must admit its ultimate lack of coherence. This comes from their sense that the struggle they describe is an unequal one, that the things they respond to cannot survive in an ugly brutal world. There is an image in *Le Sang des Betes* which sums this up. Lambs lie helplessly on their back waiting for their throats to be cut. In Vigo's case there is a retreat into a world of fantasy, the dream of the *L'Atalante*, a world of innocence and happiness. Franju cannot make this escape so easily (the Second World War with its threat of total destruction has obviously left its mark on him). Since there is no easy escape route, the only way left is pointed by the final madness of Christine in *Eyes without a Face*.

The reason for the failure of the positive forces in Vigo's and Franju's films can be located in their description. The symbols that Vigo and Franju use are children, lovers, animals and the natural world. They are attractive symbols but they lack force and strength. In the end one has the suspicion that Vigo and Franju are victims of one of the oldest dreams of all, the dream of eternal youth and innocence. Maturity is feared because it is identified with age and corruption.

Bunuel differs tremendously here. In *L'age d'or* Modot is not a gentle lover—the contrast is not simply between the weak and the strong. And in his later films, his attitudes



become more subtle and complex. There is no schematic division of the world into the innocent and the corrupt. Formally you can see this in the realistic structure of Bunuel's films and the way the irrational and unconscious forces of life inform and create tensions inside the structure. For Bunuel, reality is "anarchist". He is also able to make fine distinctions in his judgments. He sees clearly, for example, the difference between genuine and assumed innocence. It is the difference between the "innocent" Viridiana nervously stretching out her hand for the cow's udder and the little girl skipping under the tree where the uncle has just hanged himself because "he liked to see me skip". This latter innocence has a toughness that enables it to survive. But even the destruction of false innocence does not necessarily lead to the destruction of the person. In Bunuel's world, people survive if they are prepared to learn.

The qualities of the anarchist cinema mark it off clearly from the mainstream of the contemporary cinema. If we compare the anarchists with the finest representative of this mainstream, Jean Renoir, the differences are highlighted. Renoir inheriting the values and aesthetic of the nineteenth century novel, creates a solidly observed, well established world. There may be signs of disintegration or collapse but the outlines are still clear. Characters are defined primarily by their social relations. It is very much a world of class, manners and position. If anything, the anarchists have more in common with the religious artists of the cinema, with men like Robert Bresson and Ingmar Bergman than with the kind of cinema that Jean Renoir so finely represents.

There is one final claim to be made for the anarchist cinema. The vision of Jean Vigo, Georges Franju and Luis Bunuel, with its sense of violence, of mystery, innocence, anxiety and corruption is clearly a contemporary vision. It is immediately relevant to our world of power states, mass murder, torture, protests and revolts. It is the most creative tradition in the cinema to-day, the vision we have most to learn from.

*Obtainable from the publishers, Peace News, 5 Caledonian Road, London, N.1; The British Film Institute, 81 Dean Street, London, W.1, and Collett's Bookshop, 66 Charing Cross Road, London, W.C.2, 2s. 4d. post free*