

DVDs | Dave Kehr

Buñuel at His Wildest, In Circulation Again

WHEN Luis Buñuel, as an aspiring young filmmaker, was running around with the Surrealist brat pack in the Paris of the late 1920s, he most likely participated in one of the group's famous rituals. Its members would drop into movie theaters in the middle of the feature and stay only until the plot began to become clear, and then they would decamp — off to discover the flow of arbitrary, meaningless images at the theater next door.

Buñuel recreated this discontinuous, disorienting experience in his first two films, both of which provoked gratifying scandals: "Un Chien Andalou" (1929), and "L'Âge d'Or" (1930), both created in collaboration with Salvador Dalí.

While the outrage focused on the films' sexual and anticlerical content, it may have been Buñuel's refusal of the conventional link between scenes that audiences found most deeply upsetting. These were not movies that carried the spectator along through a clear train of events and logically ordered emotions, but movies that stopped and started, stuttered and repeated themselves. They didn't move forward as much as they continually exploded in your face.

Economic constraints prevented Buñuel from continuing this line of exploration; instead, with his next project, the slyly self-contradictory documentary "Las Hurdes" ("Land Without Bread," 1933), he began his practice of subverting from within, introducing contradictory images and phrases that opened holes in the narrative rather than shattering it outright.

It was this stealth approach that saw Buñuel through the early part of his period as a director of commercial features in Mexico, which began with "Gran Casino" in 1947. But as he began to gather some prestige, first by winning the best director prize at Cannes for his 1950 film "Los Olvidados" and then with international co-productions like "The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe" (1954) and "La Fièvre Monte à El Pao" (1959), he gradually recovered his youthful freedom.

The breakthrough was "Viridiana," a film commissioned by the Mexican producer Gustavo Alariste as a showcase for his wife, the blond and sultry Silvia Pinal. When the ferociously blasphemous "Viridiana" shared the top prize at Cannes in 1961, it opened the way to Buñuel's late, great period, which included two more films with Mr. Alariste and Ms. Pinal.

Long out of circulation, "The Exterminating Angel" (1962) and "Simon of the Desert" (1965) will be released on Tuesday by the Criterion Collection. They remain among the most free-spirited of Buñuel's films, fully recovering the nonnarrative liberty of his earliest work. These are both movies in which, by conventional terms, nothing much really happens, but a lot goes on.

In "The Exterminating Angel" the guests at an elegant dinner party, held in a gated mansion in an unspecified, vaguely European city, find themselves unable to leave. Still dressed in their evening clothes, they curl up on the sofas and floor of a sitting room, unable even to cross the threshold that would lead them to sustenance in the dining room and kitchen.

The servants, having sensed something in the air, have all left the house; only the major-domo (Claudio Brook) remains, and once he has crossed into the sitting room to bring some food he finds himself trapped along with his master (the strangely diabolical Enrique Rambal). What hope there is seems to center on Leticia, a young woman (Ms. Pinal) who is known in the group as a virgin.

Early in the film Buñuel introduces a sort of temporal hiccup: we see the group of guests entering the house twice; a bit later the host repeats a toast, seeming to realize, as he does so for the second time, that he has already pronounced the same words. It's this repetition that, by breaking the formal rules of continuity and progress, seems to set off the crisis, removing these discreetly charming bourgeois from the flow of cinematic storytelling; they will remain in a state of stasis until Leticia stage-manages another repetition, asking the guests to assume the positions they were in before the crisis struck. Mysteriously, they are freed, at least until they go to a church to give thanks, where another repetition — the liturgical ritual — imprisons them again.

Much of "Simon of the Desert" takes place in an even more confined space: the square meter of platform that, perched atop a pillar in the middle of a desert, is home to the title character, a saintly penitent (Mr. Brook again). As Buñuel suggests, through repeated vertical camera movements that emphasize Simon's elevation from everyday life, the saint has tried to place himself above the narrative flow, and presumably close to God.

God does not make an appearance, but the Devil (Is. Pinal) emphatically does: first in the guise of a schoolgirl who tries to lure Simon down with the sight of her shapely legs; then as a

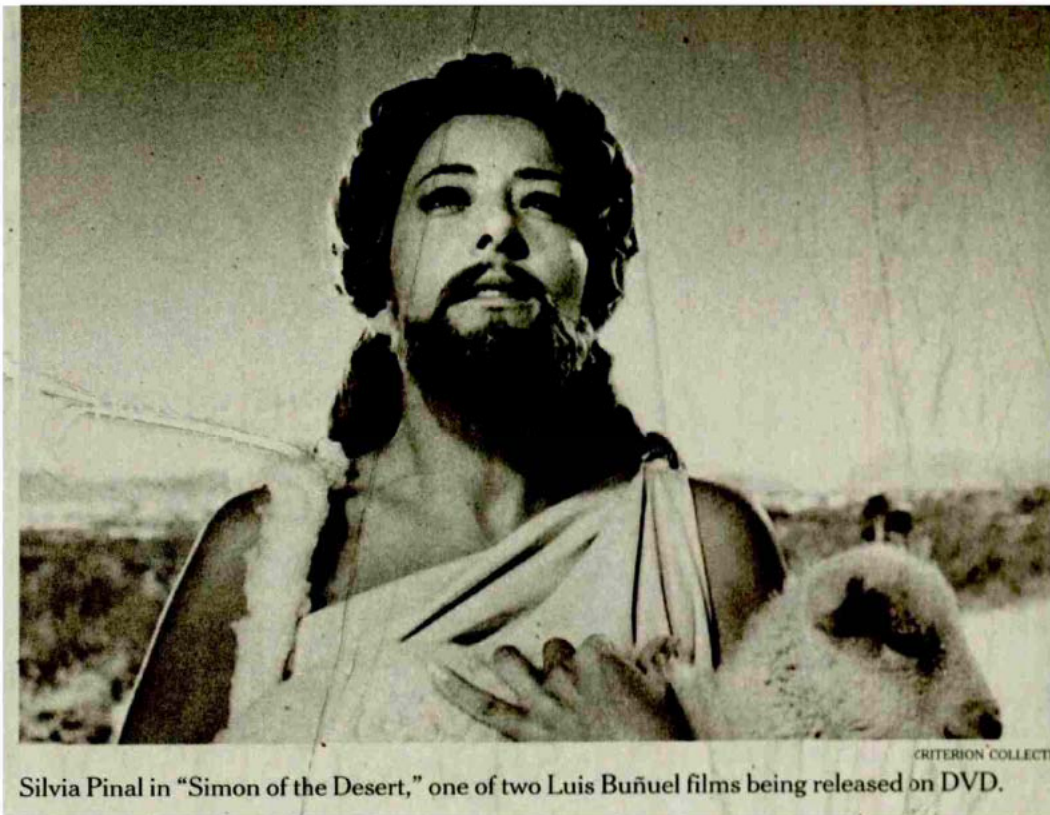
bearded but blatantly female Jesus carrying a lamb; and finally as a stylishly coiffed woman who succeeds in spriting Simon off, by means of a jet, to a Manhattan discotheque — Buñuel's persuasive idea of hell.

Bill Krom, in his superb recent study "Luis Buñuel" (Taschen), notes that Mr. Alatríste ran out of money before Buñuel was able to film his concluding image: a return to Simon's pillar, now supporting a giant billboard. But its

unfinished state seems to suit "Simon of the Desert." A conventional close would indeed bring Simon back to Earth, and Buñuel seems to have too much affection for this obsessive among obsessives, the holiest of his holy fools, to allow that to happen.

With a running time of only 40 minutes "Simon" is neither a short nor a feature; like Simon himself, it stands apart, escaping standard forms and commercial categories, a useless object without a natural place on a program. (For years it was shown in revival houses on a double bill with another unclassifiable item, Orson Welles's 58-minute drama "The Immortal Story.")

Both "The Exterminating Angel" and "Simon of the Desert" are offered in richly textured black-and-white transfers on the Criterion discs, which the company has filled out with documentaries on Buñuel's work and recent interviews with Ms. Pinal, who remains a striking presence at 77. "To this very day," she says of "The Exterminating Angel," "I have no idea what the film is about" — words Luis Buñuel would have been pleased to hear. (The Criterion Collection, "The Exterminating Angel": \$39.95, "Simon of the Desert": \$24.95, not rated)



Silvia Pinal in "Simon of the Desert," one of two Luis Buñuel films being released on DVD.