

Winter 2005

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Recommended Citation

Jones, Julie. "Interpreting Reality: 'Los olvidados' and the Documentary Mode." *Journal of Film and Video* 57:4 (Winter 2005-06), 18-31

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Interpreting Reality: *Los olvidados* and the Documentary Mode

JULIE JONES

LUIS BUÑUEL NOURISHED AN AFFECTION FOR THE DOCUMENTARY MODE throughout his career, even claiming at one point that the nonfiction film had become his main concern ("Autobiography" 256). Recently, his most clearly documentary film, *Las Hurdes* [Land without Bread] (1933), has been the object of much debate regarding his sources, funding, and political agenda, as well as the degree to which he manipulated his material and the effects the film has had on its subject, the Hurdanos.¹ Although it is likely that this heightened interest in the expository dimension of Buñuel's work will extend to other films, so far little has been done in this direction.²

A number of Buñuel's other works reveal his interest in a film practice that foregrounds issues—*Los olvidados* [The Young and the Damned] (1950), *El* [This Strange Passion] (1953), *Ens ayo de un crimen* [The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz] (1953), and *La Voie Lactée* [The Milky Way] (1969) are a few that spring to mind—but *Los olvidados* is the only one that Buñuel himself actually presented as a documentary.³ For this reason, it is a critical film to consider in a discussion of the director's continued involvement with the expository form.

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The following study, dedicated to *Los olvidados*, concerns those elements in the film itself that align it with documentary practice, but the study gives equal weight to Buñuel's presentation of the film (mainly through interviews) and to contemporary reviews in the press, both of which stressed the film's serious social purpose and thereby reinforced an interpretation of the work as nonfiction. It is important here to consider Buñuel's conception of documentary, which makes room for parody, social satire, and surrealism. The study is not concerned with any final classification of the film (as we know, the boundary between fiction and nonfiction films is blurred), but rather with an examination of those elements within and without—or behind—*Los olvidados* that make a documentary reading fruitful and provide a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the work and its context.

Buñuel and the Documentary

Buñuel's conception of the documentary was heavily influenced by his experiences of surrealism and of communism. The surrealists' interest in documentary was an extension of their belief in the powers of photography. Andre Bazin, following their line of reasoning, writes (naively) that "The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it" (*What Is*:14). Hence Breton's inclusion of photographs in *Nadja*. He treats them as "the object itself," as incontrovertible proof of what he is trying less successfully to express through language,

and he clearly believes that they offer a direct—i.e., unmediated—access to the reality that lies beyond appearances. Beyond photography, surrealists saw that ethnographic films recording the customs of exotic tribes also afforded an outlook onto a different reality (no matter how much that “reality” was manipulated) and thereby gave them the means, once again, to contest the assumptions of Western culture.⁴

Buñuel's first three films, his freest because they were financed privately, give a good indication of his preferences. The third (*Las Hurdes*) is a straight-up documentary (although not particularly “straight,” since it also parodies the conventions of the form and, incidentally, pokes fun at the surrealists’ enthusiasm for exotic cultures) and the other two have a marked documentary interest. Dalí called *Un chien andalou* [An Andalusian Dog] (1929) a documentary of the mind (Fernández Ibáñez 163); and *L'Age d'Or* [The Golden Age] (1930), which kicks off with footage on the life of scorpions lifted from a nonfiction short and includes a pseudo newsreel, is basically an indictment of Western civilization. (In an edited version, it would be used for Communist propaganda.) Buñuel's first biographer, Francisco Aranda, argues that this triptych shows an “evolution toward pure documentary” (116).⁵

These films set the tone for the rest of Buñuel's cinematic practice. The characteristics we see distributed across the three films—the dramatization of the unconscious, the stripping away of convention, the biting social satire, the black humor and the parody of other forms, along with the attention to historic, social, and economic detail—will be a constant in his films, whether they are works of fiction or, as he insisted about *Los olvidados*, fact. For him, following the surrealists, elements of mystery or the fantastic are essential if a film is to convey a sense of reality (“Cine” 185).

Buñuel joined the Communist Party of Spain sometime between May 1931 and January 1932 and, along with a number of other comrades, left the surrealist group in 1932.⁶ His decision to film a documentary, *Las Hurdes*, the next year did not involve a renunciation of surreal-

ist practice; it is as marked by black humor and biting satire as is *L'Age d'Or*, and nothing could be more fantastic than some of its “reality” sequences.⁷ But he did see the potential of documentary as an arm of political (rather than cultural) propaganda. He infuriated Dalí by producing an edited version of *L'Age d'Or* in 1932 that was to serve as a proletarian short (*Dans les eaux glacées du calcul égoïste*), and when he sonarized *Las Hurdes* three years after filming it, he dropped its attack on the bourgeois liberal government in Spain in order to follow the Party's new Popular Front policy (Fernández Ibáñez 166). In Paris during the Spanish Civil War, he was in charge of film propaganda for the Republic. He supervised the editing of *España leal en armas* (1937) and facilitated the making of films such as Andre Malraux's *L'Espoir/ Sierra de Teruel* (1945) and Joris Ivens's *The Spanish Earth* (1937).⁸

During World War II, the Museum of Modern Art in New York hired Buñuel, who was already in the US, to edit and dub 16mm nontheatrical films, on topics ranging from defense production to science and health, for distribution in Latin America. Buñuel worked as the museum's chief editor from January 1941 to June 1943, when an outcry about his leftist leanings—by this time he had quietly dropped his membership in the Communist Party (Gubern and Hammond 63–64)—forced him to resign. He had had some hopes of making his own documentaries while at MoMA. The form attracted him in part because its relatively low cost made experimentation possible at a time when independent features had been priced out of existence (“Autobiography” 255–56). Sadly, Buñuel's work at MoMA was largely bureaucratic, and his project for making a film on schizophrenia with a disciple of Freud's in Chicago came to nothing (*Mi último suspiro* 277). However, even though he himself was not directing, his work for both MoMA and the Spanish Republic kept him in touch with documentary filmmakers and aware of what they were producing during a period when the form was flourishing.

Buñuel's interest in documentary persisted throughout his long career, but it often sur-

faced in unexpected ways. *La Voie Lactée*, for example, is an irreverent illustration of *A History of Spanish Heterodoxy*, Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo's examination of Christian heresies. Virtually all Buñuel's films, even the most playful, are grounded in a concrete economic, social, and historical reality. Aranda emphasizes this point in his biography, and he also argues that the frustrated documentary on schizophrenia found new forms years later in *El* and *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz* (116). However, as we have seen, Buñuel actually referred only to *Las Hurdes* and *Los olvidados* as documentaries.

The Right Time

Buñuel shot *Los olvidados* in early 1950, at a point when the distinction between documentary and realistic fiction film, never entirely clear, was more muddled than usual. In the days before a lightweight synchronous-sound apparatus would allow them to film with minimal intervention in the street, filmmakers had come to rely increasingly on reconstructions. These stagings involved events that had actually happened and events that could have happened (i.e., typical moments and syntheses of actual incidents; the term *reconstruction* was used, no matter how inappropriately, to cover the hypothetical as well as the actual). The resultant tendency toward fictionalization coincided with the advent of Italian neorealism and North American docudrama: fiction films that aspired to a documentary status, both in style and subject (Winston 120, 122), and that were often described as documentaries (Bar-nouw 185).

North American productions such as *Call Northside 777* (1948), directed by Henry Hathaway, and *Boomerang* (1947), directed by Elia Kazan, were based on actual events, filmed as much as possible in locations associated with those incidents, and made, at least in part, with nonprofessional actors.⁹ They performed strongly at the box office, as did the work of the Italian neorealists, who relied to an even greater extent on location shots and nonpro-

fessional actors to take a hard look at how the working class and peasants were affected by Italian war and postwar reality. It must have seemed a propitious moment, then, to make a film like *Los olvidados*.

Although Buñuel took pains to distance himself from the Italians, it is clear that the inception of this film owed much to the huge success of Vittorio De Sica's *Sciuscià* [*Shoeshine*] (1947), with its depiction of abandoned youths in an impoverished society.¹⁰ Federico Américo, the head of production for *Los olvidados*, says that producers Oscar Dancigers and Jaime Menasce came up with the idea of a tough film about Mexican urchins after seeing *Shoeshine* together; they then decided to offer it to Buñuel.¹¹ Not surprisingly, Buñuel makes no reference to *Shoeshine* in his version of the story. Instead, he says, he and Juan Larrea were playing around with the idea of a burlesque melodrama about a ragamuffin under the working title *Su huerfanito, jefe*; Dancigers told him to make what he wanted but to make it worthwhile (Aub 118).

Disarming the Critics

Buñuel's insistence on the documentary value of *Los olvidados* stemmed, in part, from his need to anticipate and disarm any reaction to the spectacle of poverty and violence that could easily have been construed as a slight to Mexico, his adopted country.¹² He argued that he only filmed what he had witnessed in person or had found in the records he consulted, at the same time asserting, in the voice-over prologue, that the problems shown in the film plague all great cities—New York, London, Paris, Mexico. In an interview in *La Prensa*, he says, "I've taken a slice of life as it's lived here, or in London or in Paris. If it's hard to watch, that's not my fault. I haven't shown anything I didn't see, and I've actually held back a lot" (qtd. in Montes).¹³ Years later Buñuel told De la Colina and Pérez Turrent that he had included the voice-over prologue, with its reference to first-world capitals, so that the censors would pass the film (61).

In fact, the outcry against *Los olvidados* was not so vociferous as has been alleged. Although initially it failed at the box office, that failure apparently had more to do with the general public's preference for Hollywood-style entertainment than with indignation (Perucho; Suárez del Solar). One critic commented that the film was a success among the poor in spite of the rather daunting ticket prices (Montes). Buñuel blamed the film's weak performance at the box office on insufficient publicity and a bad choice of theater ("Buñuel estima") for its first run. In spite of its commercial failure, *Los olvidados* garnered favorable publicity in Mexico even before winning the Jury Prize at Cannes. After the prize, which focused international attention on the Mexican film industry, the film received fresh accolades in the press, was given a new run, and garnered ten Arieles, Mexico's highest awards, including best film, best director, and best screenplay (*Novedades*). One critic even accused the Mexican film world of suffering from "olvidaditis" (Juan Dieguito). The reviewers defended Buñuel from charges of Mexico bashing; his strategy had worked.

A Documentary in Mind

For tactical reasons, then, the director pitched *Los olvidados* as a documentary, but he did so as well because he saw the film as continuing

a line he had begun in his youth ("Buñuel estima"); in other words, he really saw it as a documentary. The following pages study the film in that light, focusing on two elements it shares with *Las Hurdes* and with other representations of the documentary mode: its serious social purpose and its claim to authenticity.

In contemporary interviews, Buñuel differentiated *Los olvidados* from his "poetic" works ("¡Tiene un sueño realista!") and from his other Mexican ventures: "The rest are melodrama, fiction with actors. This is a documentary . . ." (qtd. in Rassán). He insisted on the film's social dimension. In 1954, he called it "a social protest film" and continued, "I had to make a film that was socially conscious. That's the direction I'm going in" ("Testimonio" 7). He told the *Revista de América* critic that the film owed its success to the fact that "it's not a private story. . . . The problems of private individuals . . . are just not very interesting any more. You have to see yourself as part of mankind" (qtd. in Climent 25).

The tone here is consistent with Buñuel's political sympathies. He always insisted on his admiration for the Communist cause even though he refused, for pragmatic reasons, to acknowledge his onetime membership in the Party. His films would continue to be rooted in a deep-seated awareness of the class structure and its effects (for him, of course, these would



Photo 1: Location photograph of a market on the outskirts of Mexico City, taken by Buñuel. Courtesy of Archivos Documentales (AB 1108.684), Filmoteca Española, Madrid.

include the psychological). This emphasis on the individual as representing a larger body accords well with documentary practice, which is concerned primarily with the group, however defined. As Winston points out, "Parts need to stand for whole classes if a claim of social relevance is to be sustained" (134). Documentary titles often point to this concern for the group: *Workers and Jobs* (1935), *Tenants in Revolt* (1934), *The People of the Cumberland* (1937), *Nightcleaners* (1975), *The Revolt of the Fishermen* (1934), and *The Forgotten Ones—Los olvidados*.

Buñuel was clearly familiar with documentary discourse. In interviews, he made the kind of appeal to science that was widely used to legitimate documentaries: "My film doesn't appeal primarily to our emotions, but rather to our sense of reason." He even went so far as to say at one point, "I was inspired by psychopedagogy" (qtd. in Montes).¹⁴ He insisted, too, on the amount of research involved in the film: "I started going to the Juvenile Court, to the women's prison, that María Luisa Ricaud directed. She let me see the reports of—what do you call them?—social workers. I went to clinics for the retarded, I saw the reports on individual beggars" (qtd. in Aub 118; see also "Diario del Arte" 2 and Montes). The film's bleak ending also comes from a documented source: a newspaper account of the discovery of a dead twelve-year-old boy on a garbage dump.

Documentary films turn on questions of evidence and testimony—documentation—to support the contention that they provide insight into actual phenomena. (Although this claim is highly problematic, it is part of the scientific longing that characterizes the form).¹⁵ Its narrative structure doesn't admit the talking heads that people so many examples of the mode, but *Los olvidados* does cite the support of experts and institutions—the Behavioral Clinic of the Ministry of Public Education, the Social Services Department, the Farm School—in a prominently displayed note of thanks following the credits. These mentions provide what Bill Nichols calls "the institutional framework" that helps us recognize a documentary as such (*In-*

troduction 22). In *Los olvidados*, as elsewhere, the reference to institutions signals the kind of film we will see, and the voice-over in the opening sequence reinforces that orientation.

Buñuel's insistence on the film's institutional credentials and on the amount of research that went into it are part of his effort to validate its take on the subject at hand. Following classic documentary practice, he also insists on his personal experience of the conditions he films. This assertion that the filmmaker has spent time on site and knows whereof he speaks (no matter how slight the actual exposure may be) has formed part of documentary discourse since the making of *Nanook of the North* (1922) because it bolsters the form's claims to authority and also assures the spectators—this assumption underlies all documentary practice—that the film opens a window onto a segment of the preexisting world.¹⁶ Although Buñuel doesn't include himself and his crew in the film, as he did in *Las Hurdes*—or rather, he does so only obliquely in the scene in which Pedro throws an egg at the camera¹⁷—he stakes his claim to firsthand knowledge repeatedly in interviews and commentaries: "I spent almost six months getting to know those poor neighborhoods. I'd head out early by bus and wander through the alleyways, making friends, seeing what people looked like, visiting houses. . . . I walked around Nonoalco, the Plaza de Romita, a lost city in Tacubaya" (qtd. in De la Colina and Pérez Turrent 56). He sees himself as bearing witness to a reality that he has experienced intimately and that his detractors, Mexican as well as foreign, simply do not know: "In my incursions into the poor neighborhoods of the capital, I saw things many journalists knew nothing about, things that *are now being shown for the first time*" (qtd. in "Diario del arte" 2, emphasis added).

In his commentary on the problems of poverty, broken families, and delinquency, Buñuel avoids easy answers. The voice-over with which *Los olvidados* opens states baldly that "the film is not optimistic; it leaves solutions up to the progressive forces of society" (19). This is considerably toned down—probably with the censors in mind—from the contention in the

original screenplay that the problem would be dealt with only by "a more just society" (5). In any event, the film itself presents no answer, and this absence left a number of reviewers, evidently accustomed to the problem-solution structure common in the documentary, at a loss.¹⁸ Buñuel, as usual, refused to spell out the film's meaning—"I haven't tried to moralize in *Los olvidados*, eh? The moral effect, if there is one, will be experienced by the spectator in his contact with the film" (qtd. in Montes)—but the message of the film is felt even more forcefully for being implicit: the only real solution to the problem of delinquency among the poor lies in a massive social change, the kind that would, as the director of the Farm School remarks wryly, "lock up poverty for good" (105).

Buñuel's refusal to provide *Los olvidados* with the sort of obvious thesis favored by most documentarians stems, then, from his preference for making viewers come to the meaning of a film on their own, but it is also part of his concern with giving *Los olvidados* a sense of life lived, rather than analyzed (a point that will be taken up later). His proximity to the material validates the treatment, suggesting that Buñuel has somehow accessed the real when others have failed, an assertion that is the very stuff of documentary, as we have seen. Appropriately, then, included in the credits of *Los olvidados* is a notice to the effect that "This film is based entirely on real events, and all the characters are authentic."

To begin with, *Los olvidados* concerns a specific place and a definite time. It takes place during the presidency of Miguel Alemán (1946–52), a period of economic development and modernization that "forgot" the peasants by abandoning the program of land distribution instigated under Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–40). Under Cárdenas, a third of the population was awarded a parcel of land, and it seemed that the promise of the Revolution (1910–17) was finally being fulfilled. Succeeding governments, however, refused to support subsistence farming, opting instead for the creation of modern factory farms that benefited the wealthy and foreign corporations but left peasant farmers

without a livelihood because labor was displaced by machinery. At the same time, investment in social programs dropped precipitously (Acevedo-Muñoz 60). In ever increasing numbers, peasants fled from poverty in the countryside to poverty in the capital.

In 1949, Jesús Silva Herzog published an essay in *Cuadernos Americanos* announcing that the Revolution was dead. Ernesto Acevedo-Muñoz cites Silva's piece as part of an ongoing debate occasioned by the Alemán government's conservative turn, its outright renunciation of Revolutionary values, and its promotion of accelerated modernization: the crisis in Mexican identity. He argues, further, that *Los olvidados* also forms part of this national interrogation (57–79).

The film shows Mexican culture at this transitional point between a traditional and a modern culture. But it also makes clear that for most peasants trapped in slums outside the city proper modernity does not mean education and a chance of advancement; instead, it's represented by street smarts or crime. Meanwhile, the traditional is reduced to superstition and the hypocritical lamentations of the Blindman. The huge framework of a skyscraper in construction hovering over a wasteland has not just a metaphoric but also an indexical value. The camera here meticulously documents the vestiges of the old order, the avatars of the new, and the disorder entailed by the shift from one to the other.¹⁹

In fact, Buñuel made a huge effort—apart from his (and Luis Alcoriza's) research into the records—to make his representation of Mexican slum life as trustworthy as possible. As late as *My Last Breath* (1982), he defended the film's veracity in things large and small. A Mexican mother would never act like Pedro's? But he'd read a story in the newspaper about a woman who tossed her little son out of a moving train. You'd never find three brass beds in a wooden shack? But Buñuel himself had actually been in such a shack and seen the beds (243–44). He took Edward Fitzgerald, the set-designer, with him on countless forays into the slums and got Pedro Urdimales to "Mexicanize" the dialogue.

(The original script in the Filmoteca Española shows the extent of that reworking.) He used mostly nonprofessionals as actors and shot extensively on location—primarily Nonoalco—in a style that imitated the newsreel, much to the dismay of his cameraman, Gabriel Figueroa (Baxter 211).

Neorealist Techniques

In giving *Los olvidados* its feeling of actuality, Buñuel used techniques learned, in large part, from the Italian neorealists, although he never admitted the debt and excoriated them for a tendency to fall into sentimental clichés. He shares their concern with showing a specific time and place and their awareness of an actuality that impinges on—is, in fact, the very stuff of—the action at hand. Much of that feeling is conveyed through camera style and the use of location shooting.

Buñuel planned carefully to give the shooting of *Los olvidados* the hit-or-miss quality of news coverage. In many sequences, the establishing shot comes late, or not at all. The composition seems haphazard. In one scene, the boys' legs are cut off at the knees. In another, one of the boys walks straight into the camera, momentarily darkening the screen. In the scene when the gang attacks the Blindman, the camera apparently has a hard time following the action, which is off-center or even off-screen. In the numerous market scenes, a constant stream of customers and vendors passes in front of the lens; there is no sense of remove: viewers feel they are in the middle of the actual market as people go about their business. The camera at times follows random figures that have no relation to the drama except as part of the general milieu that generates it.²⁰ Transitions between scenes are functional but not overly smooth, since prompts (like dialogue hooks and establishing shots) are kept to a minimum. Throughout *Los olvidados*, Buñuel avoids images of superficial beauty, creating instead an effect of dirtiness. Aranda argues that "Buñuel did everything within his power to prevent the audience from experiencing any

agreeable aesthetic impressions," but that he could not entirely hold back Figueroa, who gave the film a rich palette of greys instead of the harsh contrasts the director desired (138).

Like the neorealists, Buñuel made a point of not using professional actors in the film. The cast included some students from the Farm School, but the requirement of a grade-school education probably excluded most slum kids—although the child who played Ojitos apparently had a story much like his character's (De la Colina and Pérez Turrent 56–57). Buñuel, however, chose the cast very carefully for the physical types he wanted to represent, and he used the few professional actors (Miguel Inclán and Stella Inda were the only two generally recognized) in an understated way.²¹ This casting meant that the screen was peopled largely with unfamiliar faces chosen not for their "star" quality but for their credibility. The juvenile actors were extensively rehearsed (Aranda 139), but allowed to ad-lib in background dialogues and engage freely in horseplay, contributing once again to the sense that the camera is spying on spontaneous behavior.²²

Documentary with a Twist

When Buñuel claims that what De Sica and Rossellini did had already been done in the novel, he is less than candid (Climent 25). He owed more than he cared to admit to the neorealists, who, as we have seen, had already worked out techniques for giving their films the look of actuality footage. *Los olvidados*, however, differs from their work in significant ways.

One of the most obvious differences is Buñuel's insistence on providing his characters with an inner life that is projected on screen. His insistence (see above) that the film owes everything to science and nothing to poetry was just part of his strategy for subverting criticism. In a 1958 address, he complains that the neorealists' attempts to represent reality fail precisely because they lack poetry and a sense of mystery ("Cine" 185). The neorealists focus on the material circumstances that define a character: the Bicycle Thief is a man who needs

a bicycle, period. For Buñuel, the inner life is part of the equation; it is affected by circumstances, but it also spills over into these circumstances in strange and sometimes perverse ways. Robert Kolker calls him "the neo-realist of the unconscious" (95). Think of the moment when Jaibo, driven not only by lust but also by a vague memory of his mother's face, seduces Pedro's mother; or of Pedro's deadly attack on the hens, which he associates with that mother and her betrayal. These tangled emotions might just possibly be perceptible to an attentive observer, but this is not the case with the dream sequence that revolves around a hunk of meat and the uncanny images that accompany Jaibo's death. Buñuel would argue, in fact did argue, that these imaginative projections offer glimpses into an expanded reality (the comprehensive reality of surrealism—"Cine" 185), but it is a reality not to be found in the documents on which the film is based.

There is also an eccentricity about many of Buñuel's characters (here and elsewhere) that sets them off from most of the figures that populate neorealist drama. The latter conform to type, but Buñuel's characters have an almost Dickensian quality, with quirky traits that cannot be explained by the constraints of the situation. The Blindman, for example, is not just avaricious, wicked, a "Porfirista," and a pedophile; he's also a witch-doctor and a one-man band. Ojitos, the lost child, is also a storehouse of folk wisdom regarding good luck charms and beauty tips. Characters like these represent social and economic groups, yes, but beyond that they are fiercely individual.

Buñuel criticized the neorealists most severely for a tendency to the literary cliché, which, as he saw it, vitiated their claim to realism.²³ Their cultivation of the pathos of the victim—already an established tradition in documentary—may be due in part to the experience of filming in a war-torn country; nevertheless, it engenders just that sentimentality the directors had sought to avoid in technical terms. Buñuel strips away the sentimentality and treats his characters, villains and victims (and villainous victims), with a ferocity that left contemporary

reviewers agape, and an astringent Spanish humor that escaped many (especially among the English and North Americans).

This ferocity may have been motivated in part by a need to set himself off from De Sica (whom he admired) and Rossellini (whom he did not). It also suited Buñuel's taste in filmmaking. Certain scenes in *L'Age d'Or* and almost all of *Las Hurdes* are notable for their brutality. *Los olvidados*, in fact, opens with an allusion to *Las Hurdes*: the close-up of a child of frightening ugliness, who is playing the bull and who looks more animal than human, much like the cretinous hurdanos who were treated with the same unforgiving close-ups.²⁴ The harshness doesn't preclude a compassion that encompasses the bad lots as well as the good, but it does forestall the kind of easy pathos that undermines many of the Italian productions. "I wanted to protest the sad condition of the poor without beautifying it," Buñuel commented, "because I detest the saccharine treatment so often given to the character of the poor" (qtd. in Sánchez-Vidal 119).

Buñuel, then, took what he could use from the neorealists and molded it to his own ends. He saw the film as a return to the self, picking up where he left off in *Las Hurdes* ("Buñuel estima"), that is, with his own very personal take on documentary practice, which, as we have seen, includes elements of surrealism, social satire, and parody. Commercial considerations and the need to negotiate the maze of state censorship forced him to curb some of his impulses: "I toned down the surrealist side so that the audience . . . could follow the film, and . . . I tried to terrify the bourgeoisie a little less" (qtd. in Díaz Ruanova). Apart from Pedro's dream and Jaibo's dying vision, the surrealistic elements here are limited to the sort of bizarre juxtapositions daily life supplies in a society in transition. The attack on the bourgeoisie is implicit rather than overt, but it's still hard to miss. Consider, for example, the merry-go-round scene, in which a nattily attired little girl sails around on her ride, happily indifferent to the ragged urchins her age who are pushing the contraption.²⁵

Las Hurdes functions simultaneously as a documentary and as a parody of documentary practice, much of the parody located in the titles and the voice-over commentary—techniques practically synonymous with documentary—which carry objectivity to the point of cruel indifference. In *Los olvidados*, Buñuel also plays with the voice-of-god commentary, but here—apart from the opening sequence—the voice of god is displaced onto the Blindman, an archconservative and pedophile, who provides a running critique of modern life: “When Porfirio Díaz was in charge, people behaved, and women stayed at home” (25). Unlike the voice-over in the first sequence, which presumably speaks for the director and which admits having no easy answer to the problem of juvenile delinquency, the Blindman has a very neat solution: “They should hang all these criminals up by their feet” (*Los olvidados* 114). Finally, he goes beyond commentary and actually puts his recommendation into effect; in other words, he plays God. He informs on Jaibo and then tells the police where they can find him. When he hears the shots ring out that will bring about the boy’s death, he intones prophetically: “One down! One down! Soon they’ll all meet their ends (he looks at the sky and shakes his fists). They should all be killed before they’re born!” (*Los olvidados* 125). In this terrible parody, the voice of god is taken literally. It’s the voice of the Old Testament deity embodied in a blind man who has no heart.²⁶

The parodic element that distinguishes *Las Hurdes* resurfaces obliquely, then, in *Los olvidados*. Like the earlier film, *Los olvidados* makes no effort to evoke pathos in its treatment of the marginalized population and the very real problems on which it focuses—just the contrary. Both films intend to shock viewers out of their complacency rather than lull them with easy tears. Their wake-up call is all the louder for being unstated. Yet there are obvious differences as well. *Las Hurdes* is a parody. It closely follows the conventions of the form in order to subvert them; narrative, therefore, takes a back seat to exposition. Ultimately there is little question that it belongs to the genre. *Los olvi-*

dados does not so obviously fit; it has a point to make, yes, but it’s driven by narrative.

Narrative

Documentary is never entirely free of narrative (in *Las Hurdes* it involves the film crew’s exploration of the region), but many commentators insist that the form always gives rhetoric precedence over narrative. Bill Nichols, for example, argues that the neorealist works are not quite documentaries because they move toward a “congruence with the real that documentary must avoid, ultimately, if it is to constitute a representation or argument about the real” (*Representing* 169), and Steven Lipkin points out that “even a documentary dependent upon re-creation places subject over story” (x).

Winston, on the other hand, insists that, although documentaries tend to privilege an argumentative over a narrative structure, there are enough exceptions to negate the rule (253). Thinking along similar lines, William Guynn writes that “what distinguishes documentary from fiction film is not the simple presence or absence of narrative” since narrative is an essential component of all documentaries, and he adds that there is no particular narrative mode associated with documentary: “Certain documentaries closely resemble the fiction film in that they deploy its basic signifying structures at many textual levels” (154). Carl Platinga, too, argues that, because of reenactment—long considered an essential part of documentary practice—it’s not any formal quality that determines how the audience sees a film, but rather the context in which the film is seen (38). Nichols himself admits at one point that the real difference between documentary and fiction film lies not in considerations of form but in “what we make of the documentary’s representation of the evidence it presents” (*Representing* 125); later he refers to the importance of context—specifically a film’s institutional credentials—in establishing an audience’s expectations (*Introduction* 22–23). This suggests that audience reception plays a—the?—critical role. Winston concludes,



Photo 2: Slums on the edge of Mexico City, with the modern city and the skeleton of a high-rise building in the background. Photograph taken by Buñuel. Courtesy of Archivo Documentales (AB1108.686), Filmoteca Española, Madrid.

simply, that “The difference [between documentary and fiction] is to be found in the mind of the audience” (253).

Contemporary Reactions

No matter how we view it now, at the time it was released, *Los olvidados* was accepted by a great number of reviewers as a documentary. As we have seen, Buñuel carefully orchestrated his presentation of the film to elicit this response. The film spoke to a problem that affected many nations in the 1940s. In postwar Europe, destitute children, many of whom had lost one or both parents, joined youth gangs and turned to petty crime to avert hunger (Covey 61). With the dissolution of the Empire, waves of immigrants moved to Britain from the colonies, and they too formed youth gangs (Covey 61). Throughout the Americas as well, postwar emigration to the big cities led to a huge jump in juvenile gang violence, whether in New York or in Mexico City. Critics saw then that *Los olvidados* involved the serious consideration of an issue (or set of issues, since the film also implicated the family and the social structure) that was of much concern to their societies and was much discussed by academic and government bodies. All these

considerations probably influenced the critics’ response.

The reception of the film as a documentary was particularly marked in Great Britain and the United States, both of which in 1950 had strong traditions of factual filmmaking.²⁷ Mexico did not have an established tradition. Reviewers there referred repeatedly to the film’s realism—“people say it’s the most realistic film produced in Mexico” (Rassán)—and to the social problems explored therein, without considering its claims to documentary status. There were some exceptions. Efraín Huerta described it as “an authentic document about the belt of garbage dumps that surrounds the city of Mexico” (*El Nacional*). *El Universal* referred to its treatment of “a serious social problem” and cited its “civic courage,” and Mercedes Pinto called it “a sociological film” (*El Avance*). Octavio Paz, in the essay he distributed in Cannes, speaks of it as “a social film” but then goes on to state categorically that “it is not a documentary,” arguing that instead it belongs to the “passionate and ferocious” tradition of Goya and Posada, but without explaining exactly why that heritage precludes documentary status (10).

On the other hand, although some English and North American reviewers described it as a pseudo- or semidocumentary, most tended

to accept it as part of the genre. The headline in the *Manchester Post* read "Origin of Crime Exposed in Mexican Film." Maude Miller compared it to the Griersonian documentary and wondered "where films of this nature, weighted with so much sociological purpose, fit in cinema entertainment" (*Manchester Daily Dispatch*). Kenneth Tynan described it as a "sociological film" (*Sight and Sound*). Dilys Powell saw it as "a film drawn not from the subconscious but from the police files" (*Sunday Times*). *The Observer* noted that "its purpose is deadly serious." *The Daily Graphic* called it "a factual film," and *Empire News*, "a social document." Dorothy Walker wrote that after seeing it "people are sure to understand better the forces that breed selfishness, brutality and crime" and called it an "expertly done documentary" (*San Francisco News*). The *New Orleans States* argued that "Every parent, every school teacher, every social worker or welfare agency employee should see this picture." Other reviews gave the film a similar reading. Finally, the National Medical Correctional Association (US) held a special showing of the film at its annual congress in 1951. The Secretary, Ralph S. Banay, commented in his presentation that the story "has all the essentials of the documentary film without a ponderous editorialization."

As we have seen, Buñuel himself created the context that elicited this critical response by repeatedly describing the film as a documentary, by referring to the amount of research into police reports and reformatory records that had gone into it, by insisting (both inside and outside the film) "that it is all merely true,"²⁸ by prominently displaying the film's "institutional credentials" after the credits, and by starting it off with the voice-over that signals a nonfiction film. He also made a point of hiring amateur or little-known actors and of filming extensively on location.

That this insistence on the documentary nature of the film was part of a strategy for getting *Los olvidados* past the censors and into theaters is clear. Years later, Buñuel told De la Colina and Pérez Turrent that he had no interest in psychopedagogy—in spite of earlier

declarations—and that he simply wanted to tell a story (see above). His comments show a real interest in representing as faithfully as possible the social conditions of children who had been left behind by progress, but Buñuel obviously believed *Los olvidados* had to tell a compelling story if its message was to reach a wide public. The message here is the same one we find in all his major films: we do not live in the best of worlds; you must at the very least recognize this ("Cine" 186).

Michael Renov writes that the domains of fiction and nonfiction "inhabit one another" (*Theorizing* 3). This study has not attempted to position *Los olvidados* on one or the other side of a divide, but rather has suggested that a reading that expands questions of genre to include the social and cinematic moments, in Mexico and the larger world, when the film was made and released will provide us with a deeper understanding and greater appreciation of this controversial work.

NOTES

1. Up for discussion have been Buñuel's sources, funding, political agenda, and manipulation of material, as well as the film's effect on its subject, the *Hurdanos*. Recent studies include the collection of essays that accompanied the 1999 exhibition on the film at the Institut Valencià d'Art Modern (*Tierra sin pan: Luis Buñuel y los nuevos caminos de las vanguardias*), Mercè Ibarz's *Buñuel documental: 'Tierra sin pan' y su tiempo*, and Juan Carlos Ibáñez Fernández's "Elementos para la contextualización histórica de 'Tierra sin pan': El documentalismo al servicio de la Revolución."

2. The writer is using *documentary*, *expository*, and *nonfiction* here quite loosely to indicate a film that foregrounds issues; that is, at least to some extent, grounded on actual events; and that has a serious social purpose. In a few paragraphs appended to his "Autobiography" when he was looking for work at the Museum of Modern Art, Buñuel spoke of his interest in documentary. He divided the form into two types: the "descriptive" and the "psychological," which, "while both descriptive and objective, tries to interpret reality." This type can express "love, sorrow, and humor" and "it is much more complete, because besides illustrating, it is moving" (256). This, too, is a definition that leaves a lot of latitude. Like Grierson, who defined his practice as "the creative treatment of actuality" (qtd. in Winston 11), Buñuel was unaware, or indifferent to, the contradiction.

3. Aranda makes a forceful case for the documentary interest of a wide range of Buñuel's films (116–18).

4. See Clifford 121–27 and 145–46 for a discussion of surrealist ethnography.

5. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

6. Román Gubern and Paul Hammond fix the date between May 1931 and June 1932 (63–64), but a letter from Pierre Unik to Maurice Thorez, dated 30 January 1932, describes Buñuel as a member of the Spanish Communist Party (Bibliothèque National, Paris, Nouv Acq Fr 25094, Folios 33–35).

7. I use quotation marks because a number of these sequences were rigged. The death of the goat (it tumbles dramatically off a cliff, not because of a misstep, as the narrator suggests, but because it was shot) is a case in point.

8. As head of propaganda at the Republican embassy in Paris, he arranged a safe-conduct for Ivens (*Mi último suspiro* 194) and government financing for Malraux's film (*De la Colina and Pérez Turrent* 44). He always insisted that his role in making *España leal en armas* was very limited (*De la Colina and Pérez Turrent* 44).

9. Similar in style and intent were Hathaway's *The House on 92nd Street* (1945) and *13 Rue Madeleine* (1946), which synthesize different actual incidents into one story, and Kazan's *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947), which originated in fiction. Daryl F. Zanuck, who produced all of these films for Twentieth Century Fox, had worked as a documentarist during the war and was familiar with location shooting (Lipkin 14–15).

10. As Marvin D'Lugo pointed out to me, the success of David Lean's *Oliver Twist* (1948) may also have played a part in the decision to make a film about a gang of destitute children.

11. This portion of Max Aub's interview with Américo is not included in *Conversaciones con Luis Buñuel*, but it's part of the taped interview and the transcript, which are both at the Fundación Max Aub (Segorbe).

12. The film concerns a gang of impoverished children living on the outskirts of Mexico City. The leader, Jaibo, has just escaped from the reformatory. With the help of Pedro, he lures Julián, whom he suspects of being a stool pigeon, to a deserted area and then murders him. Pedro is horrified by the murder but does not betray his friend. Jaibo is an orphan, and Pedro's only known parent, his mother, treats him harshly because he is the result of a rape. In an effort to get in the good graces of his mother, Pedro finds work with a knife sharpener, but Jaibo steals a knife from the shop, and Pedro is accused of theft. Again he remains silent about his friend's crime. His mother, overworked and angry, urges the police to punish Pedro. Instead, he is taken to the Farm School, where he is treated kindly and an effort is made to educate him. However, Jaibo, fearful that Pedro may betray him, lies in wait. When

Pedro is sent on an outside errand, Jaibo seizes the money. Humiliated and infuriated by this loss, Pedro returns to his neighborhood and denounces his erstwhile friend. That night, Jaibo murders him, and a little later the police shoot down Jaibo. In the film's final image, Pedro's body is tipped onto a garbage dump by people who are afraid of being involved.

13. The majority of the interviews, reviews, and publicity notices cited here come from three folios of press clippings related to *Los olvidados* that are part of the Archivo Buñuel, which Javier Herrera kindly made available to me at the Filmoteca Nacional Española. I include as much information as is available on the clippings, but in many cases date and page number are missing.

14. Some of this was just showmanship. Years later, when Buñuel was talking about researching the juvenile court files, Tomás Pérez Turrent asked if he were interested in treating the reeducation of minors in the film, and he answered, "No. I was interested in finding characters and stories" (56).

15. For discussions of the very questionable claims to scientific truth that are part of the discourse of the form, see especially Winston 127–249 and Renov "Introduction" and "Toward a Poetics." Javier Herrera and Breixo Viejo very generously provided me with copies of some of the original location shots taken by Buñuel himself and held in the Archivo Buñuel at the Filmoteca.

16. For the effect of Flaherty's experiential stance, see Warren 4. There are numerous discussions of the assumption (both on the part of filmmakers and spectators) that documentary is transparent, that it is not a construction but a privileged view of the real. Roscoe 8–12 and Renov "Introduction" are particularly interesting. Arthur argues that even the most recent and self-conscious documentaries "manage to obviate the most self-contradictory tensions in the opposition of lived reality and tropes of presentation" (133) while they "continue to pivot on historically specific legitimations of authenticity" (134).

17. This self-conscious gesture brings up the issue of mediation, only to suggest, deceptively, that the camera has caught a spontaneous, rather than scripted, event.

18. Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times*, for example, complained "nor is any social solution even hinted."

19. Both are combined in the figure of Pedro's mother, who treats her other children with "traditional" motherly love and Pedro, the child of rape, with a modern coldness, the product of fragmented social circumstances. Her clothing—a reboso and high heels—also speaks of this transitional moment. When one critic attacked the high heels as unlikely, Buñuel defended them as he did the brass beds. Again, the idea is that these touches are real rather than (or in addition to) metaphoric.

20. Buñuel would exploit this technique fully in *Le Fantôme de la Liberté* (1974), where apparently casual encounters lead to abrupt changes in narrative direction.

21. Miguel Inclán (the Blindman) had a successful career. Stella Inda (the mother) had had leading roles in numerous films but had disappeared from the screen at the time of *Los olvidados*. Alfonso Mejía (Manuel Aldecoa), who played Pedro, was greeted as a new discovery, but he had several films behind him (Aldecoa 37–38). Alma Delia Fuentes (Meche) had appeared in a number of films but had had only one starring role, in *Guardián, el perro salvador* (1950). Roberto Cobos (el Jaibo) had a career as a nightclub dancer known as “Calambres.”

22. Numerous contemporary reviewers commented on the film’s feeling of authenticity. The following is a sample. The critic for the *New York World Telegram and Sun* wrote that the film was “so well directed that you never suspect the director’s hand. It seems to be life itself directing.” John Maddison in *Sight and Sound* comments on the pleasure of seeing young actors behave as though they weren’t aware of the camera and concludes that “Nothing here is synthetic or coy or studio-bound.” For Antonio Acevedo Escobedo of *El Nacional*, “Life itself bursts out on the screen.”

23. In an interview, he alleged that “The best Italian film, the most ambitious French production, has a little moment when it betrays pure realism. It’s because the opposite of Realism is Literature, the commonplace that’s taken for granted, that no longer smells of life” (“¡Tiene un sueño realista!”). See also “Cannes lo premió” and “Luis Buñuel y su obra.”

24. The script calls for a “close-up of the boy, who acts like a mad beast (his grimace shows a broken tooth), and throws himself into the attack, lowering his head and pointing his index fingers like horns” (19).

25. This is analogous to the pizzeria scene in *The Bicycle Thief* (1948), but without the poignant tone. Buñuel combines outrage and humor.

26. Years later, in *La Voie Lactée*, another voice of god—this time Buñuel’s actual voice—will sound on the radio of a wrecked car, threatening evildoers with hellfire and damnation.

27. For some reason, there are no French reviews among the three folders of clippings related to *Los olvidados* that were part of Buñuel’s personal collection and that are now housed in the Filmoteca Nacional Española. Antonio Castro Leal, the Mexican representative to UNESCO, commented in an interview that social workers in France saw the film as “bearing witness to a French problem.”

28. Numerous English-language reviewers referred to this comment as part of the voice-over, although it does not appear in more recent editions of the film.

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