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THE PICARO IN PARIS: THE DISCREET CHARM OF THE BOURGEOISIE AND THE PICARESQUE TRADITION

JULIE JONES

Digression is my way of telling a story,
a little like the Spanish picaresque
novel.

—Buñuel, *Mi último suspiro*¹

The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie (1972) is the middle film in a trilogy that starts with *The Milky Way* (1969) and ends with *The Phantom of Liberty* (1974). Both the first and third films fall clearly within the picaresque tradition. *Milky Way* involves the improbable adventures of a pair of pilgrims traveling on the road to Santiago, while *Phantom's* meandering plot line follows the casual encounters of a host of characters.

The picaresque elements in *Discreet Charm* are not as immediately striking as those in *Milky Way* and *Phantom*, and apart from the country-road leitmotif, these elements have been almost entirely overlooked in the criticism. Yet, as an essential part of the film's image of life as a "confused labyrinth"

(Maravall, *La Cultura del Barroco* 317), picaresque elements provide the film with a tone and a structure of meaning that do much to explain its peculiar appeal. This article examines *Discreet Charm* in relation to the conventions of the picaresque genre and the baroque mentality it embodies. I will emphasize the role of Rafael, the picaresque protagonist, arguing that he is a tongue-in-cheek self-portrait of Buñuel—a rogue from a Hispanic country who is the primary dreamer of the film.

Traditional Picaresque

In the classic picaresque novel—*Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554, anonymous), *Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599, Mateo Alemán), and *El buscón* (*The Swindler*, 1626, Francisco de Quevedo)—the protagonist (usually a he) often does not know where he will get his next meal. Yet, despite his extreme poverty, he has social pretensions. Aware that hard work will do nothing to advance his cause, he relies on disguise and trickery to improve his station. He keeps on moving to stay ahead of the law, which brings him to a variety of settings and in contact with social types who often tell him their stories. The picaresque novel, then, takes the form of a pseudo-autobiography, loosely structured to accommodate any number of episodes in the life of a small-time con man in search of his big chance. This search is repeatedly frustrated and, inevitably, even though the picaro's misadventures are amusing, the view of society he presents is bleak.

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The inception of the picaresque in the sixteenth century is usually explained by the “consciousness of crisis” (Maravell, *La picaresca desde* 11) brought about by the social, cultural, and psychological changes associated with early modernity: the emergence of the individual, the loss of a sense of community, and the recognition of social injustice as manmade rather than God-given. In Spain this situation was exacerbated by the absence of a strong middle class, a scorn for work, an exaggerated respect for honor fostered by the centuries-long Reconquest of the peninsula from the Arabs, and, finally, by the “clean-blood” statutes, which stigmatized all known descendants of Arabs and Jews even if they had converted to Christianity. For these reasons, Claudio Guillén links the emergence and resurgences of the picaresque with “days of irony and discouragement [that] disclose an awareness of civilization as oppression” (105).

The Picaresque Chez Buñuel

Discreet Charm is usually considered surrealist, but the marriage of the picaresque and the surreal here is not as ill sorted as it seems. Although surrealism ignores the material fact so essential to the picaresque, both share concerns critical to this film: an anxiety about freedom, an awareness of the oppressive nature of social institutions, and an insistence on the central role of chance. It could be argued that in writing *Le Payson de Paris*, Aragon was simply adapting the picaro’s adventures to the more restricted itinerary of the *flâneur*.

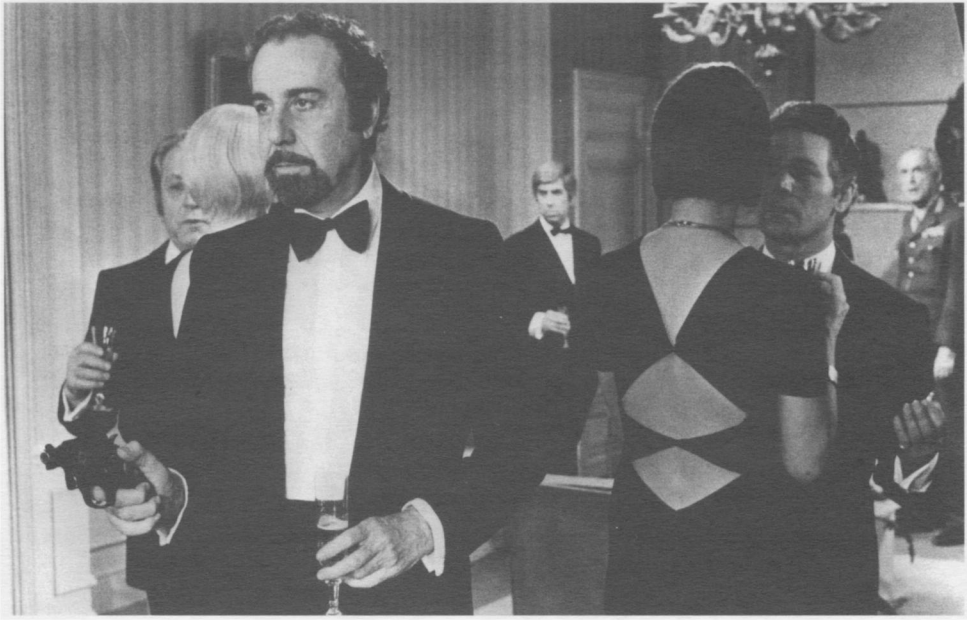
Clearly, *Discreet Charm* is not “straight” picaresque. The plot turns on the efforts of a group of well-heeled friends to get together for dinner over a period of about two weeks. Yet their struggle parodies the picaro’s most basic need (and satirizes the importance of food in French culture). Further, the film relies on picaresque elements: an episodic plot structure, interpolated narratives, use of

a high degree of coincidence, repeated frustrations, constant movement, the notion of the road, an atmosphere of roguery, and, most especially, a character who embodies the picaro. The picaro here, Rafael, ambassador of Miranda, is not a “pseudo-autobiographer”—the film is a “slice of life” rather than a “life”—but he is the “author” of at least the last three dreams, and the entire film is colored by his perceptions.

The Picaro Turned Politician

At the time Buñuel was working on *Discreet Charm*, his friend Alejo Carpentier, the Cuban novelist, was writing *Reasons of State* (*El recurso del método*, 1974), a novel hinging on the picaresque adventures of the dictator of a hypothetical Latin American country who rules his little nation from the comfort of Paris.² There are remarkable similarities between Carpentier’s prime minister and Buñuel’s ambassador. In an interview that coincided with the publication of the novel, Carpentier said that he had long dreamed of writing a novel that would continue the adventures of Quevedo’s swindler character in America (*The Swindler* ends with the character’s proposal to emigrate): “But studying the picaro who had been transplanted to American soil, I realized that he had developed new appetites, had become, first a corrupt politician, then the winner of a rigged election, then the general behind a coup, and finally [. . .] the dictator of a republic” (*El D’a* 16).

When *Reasons of State* opens, the prime minister is at the height of his power and a resident of Paris, where he assiduously cultivates the elite and near elite in an effort to transcend his less-than-elegant beginnings and become worthy of his new life. The veneer of civilization is thin, however, and in stressful moments the prime minister reverts to the less-than-civilized tactics that got him where he is. Living in Parisian society, he is forced to dissemble. The copious references



When push comes to shove, the veneer of civilization drops.

to theater all point to this role playing—an important element in the picaresque. In Paris, the dictator—boulevardier and dilettante—both is and is not what he seems.

Buñuel's ambassador also belongs to the power structure of a hypothetical Latin American republic—there are rumors that he will be promoted to minister (we are not told of what)—but, like the prime minister, he seems more interested in the good life. Along with the prime minister and the picaro in general, he is an amusing rogue, especially in those little moments when he is not quite *comme il faut*. Although he seems to be at ease with his tony friends, his dreams of persecution suggest that underneath the courtesy and apparent camaraderie, he sees himself, and his cohorts see him, as an intruder.³ Ronald Paulson describes the picaro as “the man who pretended, appeared, or even believed himself to be part of society while actually being an interloper from beyond the pale” (31). Claudio Guillén argues that he is a “half-outsider” who maintains an uneasy alliance with society, based on his assump-

tion of a role that he knows to be simultaneously absurd and essential (80).

Rafael's social performance is underlined by his official position. He represents—I use the verb advisedly—Miranda. The uneasy fit between public and private roles is revealed neatly in two contrasting scenes: in the first, Thévenot and Sénéchal come to pay Rafael for the cocaine that he has brought into the country via diplomatic valise, and in the second, the colonel heaps insults upon Rafael's homeland. When Sénéchal asks Rafael where he will invest the loot, he answers without hesitating, “Certainly not in Miranda.”⁴ But in response to the colonel's barrage of invective, Rafael replies with great if rather ludicrous dignity (everyone, including the ambassador, knows that what the colonel says must be substantially true): “You have insulted the honor of the worthy Republic of Miranda.” Again, the mask drops, and in a moment of truth, Rafael catches the colonel off guard and shoots him, thus avenging, if not exactly the besmirched honor of Miranda, at least his own offended sense of manhood.



When he dresses the part, the Bishop is treated accordingly.

A man who lives by his wits, Rafael is quick to size up a situation and act on intuition (*viz.* the two scenes with the terrorist, the massacre, even the “sourciques” scene). His reactions are much quicker than those of his French cohorts. His combination of vigilance and caution corresponds not only to the fundamental *modus operandi* of the picaresque but to the attitude recommended by any number of writers of the period, including one of Buñuel’s favorites, Baltasar Gracián (1601-58). Also a native of Saragossa, Gracián put the need to be sharp forcefully: “You’d best keep your eyes open and stay on your toes because you are surrounded by enemies” (556).

Lessons of Discretion

Gracián produced instructional manuals and philosophic novels involving the acquisition of worldly wisdom. In the film’s title, Buñuel refers to one of them: *El discreto* (“The Discreet Man”). Gracián’s guidelines are pragmatic. The discreet man knows how to use others and how to keep up appearances. “Success,” he writes elsewhere, “turns

everything to gold” (171). Gracián’s paragon has acquired his discretion through years of practice and is now in his prime, ready to enjoy himself, very much like Fernando Rey’s Rafael, with his carefully cultivated air of distinction, his commanding presence, and his fondness for the good things in life. That these things should include his friend Thévenot’s wife, that his gravely delivered pronouncements should be utterly vacuous, that his pragmatic politics allow for “necessary” brutality, and his personal morality be commodious enough to contain the drug trade all fit consistently with a perverse reading of Gracián.⁵ The “discreet man” is the picaresque made good.

Playing a Part

If success is the key, then appearance is all. For Gracián, a man’s position is simply a part to be played. It is thanks to his role as ambassador that the French receive Rafael so well; much is made of his status in the scenes involving introductions, and the little group’s preferred mode of travel is Rafael’s Cadillac

with its diplomatic corps plates, official flag, and chauffeur. Without the ambassadorial pomp and, more important, the diplomatic valise that is critical to the economic well-being of this little circle, things might well be different for Rafael.

But the question of role playing, which, of course, affects every character in this highly artificial social world, comes out even more clearly in the person of the bishop. In his cassock, he is treated with all the deference his position demands—note, again, the introductions—but in his gardening outfit or his “civvies,” he is treated, and he acts, like a servant (his first meeting with the Sénéchals, the gardening scene, the scene when he helps Mme. Sénéchal seat the army at table). The bishop repeatedly changes costume to suit the situation, and these abrupt changes have all the quality of theater. In fact, in his first scene, he enters as bishop, reenters as gardener, and then, after the Sénéchals have thrown him out on the grounds that he is a charlatan, re-reenters as bishop, at which point Mme. Sénéchal kisses his ring and her husband shows the appropriate contrition.⁶

The first dream of dinner at the colonel’s, in which the guests find themselves actually on stage, is simply to remind viewers that, with their complicated rituals, all these gatherings have been social performances (this scene parallels an earlier moment when Florence seems to look at the missing fourth wall of the set). The next dream is just as stagy: the colonel’s wife overacts, and the scene ends with a melodramatic flourish, the three shots echoing the three knocks that signaled the beginning of the performance in the first dream. Both dreams involve costumes as well; Sénéchal, Florence, and the bishop try on Napoleon’s hat (a fake), and Florence, who usually opts for casual attire, appears in a long blue gown with a camellia in hand, quite the tragic heroine. The recitations, high degree of coincidence, complex choreography (Fernando Rey describes the actors’

movements as “like a ballet” [qtd. in Sánchez Vidal 354]), and repeated grand entrances all contribute to the sense of theatricality that permeates the film.⁷

Life Is a Dream

The baroque notion of the world as theater is connected not only to the question of role playing, so important to the picaresque, but also to the sense of unreality caused, according to José Antonio Maravall in *La cultura del Barroco*, by people’s being caught between medieval and modern conceptions of the universe without having an adequate way to assimilate changes (309–418). This explains the related view of life as a dream, which is repeated in work after work, most notably in Calderón’s *Life Is a Dream*. In this play (which, incidentally, explores the ideas of patricide and infanticide that are so important to *Discreet Charm*), the protagonist is drugged and tricked into believing that events that actually happened were in dreams. His response is to doubt everything he sees. The abrupt changes to which he is subjected—he is raised in isolation, drugged and transported to the court, then drugged and returned to his lair—are higher versions of the reversals that the picaresque Pablos undergoes in *The Swindler*.

These ups and downs were part of the uncertainty of life at the time. They are similar to the quick changes that affect the discreet friends in Buñuel’s film, who are living in what the director projects as equally parlous times. Their existence, too, is invaded by the dream. Because of the depiction of the Parisian bourgeoisie, *Discreet Charm* is often compared with *L’Age d’or* (1929); however, in an interview with Carlos Fuentes, Buñuel insisted that there was a major difference. At the time of the earlier film, the bourgeoisie was “sure of itself and its institutions.” By 1972, that situation had changed into a feeling of uneasiness ultimately attributable to “the imperialistic policies of superpowers who can blow us all to

bits" (qtd. in Fuentes, "The Discreet Charm of Luis Buñuel" 70).

In *Discreet Charm* this insecurity stems first from a breakdown in the normal course of daily life—a bewildering contradiction in a dinner date,⁸ a tearoom that is mysteriously bereft of tea—and escalates to army maneuvers that threaten the house, arrests without benefit of warrants, and ultimately total destruction. Worse yet, two of these threats come from the traditional protectors of the bourgeoisie.

The dreams in the film are related, then, to the sensation that life is treacherous and to the sense that the characters are locked into bourgeois etiquette, a form of behavior not really appropriate to their changing circumstances but one from which there is no escape, hence, their sometimes hilarious ways of dealing with the inexplicable or shocking (like Mme. Thévenot's little snap of the gloves after the lieutenant's tale of patricide).

The "charm" of the title also refers to being under a charm; the characters are like sleepwalkers. As the film progresses, the boundaries between "reality" and "dream" become increasingly blurred until it is impossible to tell where one ends and another begins.⁹ This insertion of dreams within dreams occurs in one of Buñuel's favorite books: Jan Potocki's *The Saragossa Manuscript* (1805-13), an adventure tale with picaresque elements that relies not only on dreams but on such a delirious sequence of enclosed narratives that even the characters lose track.¹⁰

The Art of Digression

The interpolated stories in the film function much as do the dreams; they break up the main plot line and provide a subtext that tells a very different story involving the societal fears that beset this not-so-complacent bourgeoisie, and—this has been much

argued in the criticism—the Oedipal drama that underlies the barely ruffled surface of discreet life. Both the stories and dreams give the film a depth and resonance it would not have had otherwise.

The stories, initially, seem oddly incidental. They have no obvious relation to the main plot line, and the narrators—the lieutenant, the sergeant, and the policeman who relates the legend of the bloody brigadier—disappear after they have had their say; the stories are their *raison d'être*. The casual encounters with storytellers in the picaresque are governed by the logic of the road; they cross the picaro's trajectory. In *Discreet Charm*, the embassy, the tearoom, the restaurant, and especially the Sénéchals' house and garden function much as do crossroads or inns in the journeying novel; they are meeting points where diverse lives intersect. That the army should be quartered in the Sénéchals' house during maneuvers or a total stranger should accost the women in a chic tearoom in order to tell them about his childhood makes this clear. (Incidentally, the tealess tearoom is itself a tribute to a scene in *Quixote* involving an inn with an extensive menu of unavailable food; the other inn in the film, where the friends stumble on a wake in progress, evokes just the kind of grotesque, high-low conjunctions that typify the picaresque inn.) Although *Discreet Charm* does not involve an actual trip (I shall talk about the mysterious country road later), these unexpected encounters give the film some of the feeling of the road narrative, as do the numerous shots of the ambassador's Cadillac. The film opens with a traveling shot of the expressway seen from within the car; in more ways than one, then, the viewer is being taken for a ride.

Crossing Paths

It is the road that brings the peasant woman to the Sénéchals' gate in search of a priest (note that she just happens to stop and ask for

directions), and this happens to lead to the bishop's discovery of his parents' murderer. Coincidence and the crisscrossing of characters are typical of narratives that rely on the physical trajectories of the characters to structure the plot. In *Discreet Charm* coincidence is given visual form in scenes in which the center of interest is suddenly deflected to the periphery of the frame; the bishop's chat with Mme. Sénéchal is displaced by the appearance of a farm wagon bearing Muni on screen right. For an instant, the screen is divided equally between Mme. Sénéchal and the bishop on the left and the farm wagon on the right; then the woman approaches them and the bishop sets off with her. In the tea-room, the intense gaze of a diner in the background right attracts the attention of the women at center front. When their gaze meets the diner's, he bows and approaches. A close shot of his face fades to the scene of his story.

Two scenes in particular map out the apparently casual intersection of the characters' trajectories. In the first, the camera follows the Cadillac as it carries Rafael and the Thévenot threesome in their terrified flight from the Sénéchals' house. As the car sweeps down the drive from left to right, the bishop appears, as if by magic, from behind the car, making his way from right to left.¹¹ He doffs his hat to the passengers; the car disappears from view, and the camera follows the bishop back to the house.

Later, the scene in which Simone Thévenot leaves Rafael in the lurch is immediately followed by the appearance of the terrorist who plans to kill him. In a high angle shot, the camera follows Rafael's gaze out the window as Simone gets into the waiting car. As the car pulls away, a pair of feet enter the top of the frame at ground level, moving in the direction of Rafael's house. The camera gradually pans up from the feet to the body of the terrorist, who replaces Simone as the center of interest. Soon Rafael will transfer some of his frustrat-

ed lust onto the guerrilla, feeling her up much as the camera has. (The tryst has been interrupted, of course, by the inopportune arrival of Simone's husband, so that the whole scene is in the vein of the bedroom perambulations so typical of the picaresque.)

The camera, then, conveys the apparently haphazard conjunctions on which the plot is based.¹² The film has a casual, improvised quality that accords well with the insistence on chance that Buñuel shared with his fellow surrealists. Important in this connection is the suggestion of narratives that never follow: the dream about the train,¹³ the explanation for why the peasant woman detests Jesus Christ, the gardener's description of what the bishop's mother did to him, the follow-up of the bishop's story, the important revelations drowned out by noise, and, finally, clarification for what the characters are doing on the country road. The elision of these stories makes for a meandering, casual plot that, once again, mimics the structure of the picaresque, which is random and episodic.

Unfinished Business

What Maravall calls "the technique of incompleteness" (*Cultura del Barroco* 443) was a staple of baroque art and literature. In painting, this involved a look of carelessness that forced the viewer to back up and put together disconnected blots on the canvas. In literature, it manifested as allusion or evasion or a certain nonchalance about the plot, which might be full of "holes" and inconsistencies. Gracián and Quevedo praised Velázquez for the technique—Quevedo thought such paintings were much "truer" than those with polished surfaces—and both authors practiced the style in their own writing. Its popularity at the time is not hard to understand: it reflected the instability of the era and provides a means to engage and ultimately to influence the spectator more profoundly (Maravall, *Cultura del Barroco* 438-46).

As numerous commentators have pointed out, in *Discreet Charm* the use of incomplete narratives frustrates easy consumption of the film; it turns the situation of the characters back on the audience so that we find ourselves in an uneasy collusion with them in their search for a meal. In Buñuel's work, the use of incompleteness has a history that includes postmodernist and surrealist currents—certainly the postmodern moment gave him the freedom to make such a film, but his dialogue with the Spanish baroque provides much of its peculiar contour.

Since it takes the form of a pseudo-autobiography, the picaresque, by its very nature, is incomplete; however, it is usually governed by a stricter organization than is immediately evident. Underlying patterns create a subtext that affects and ultimately directs our reading of the text. Something similar happens in *Discreet Charm*, so that the emotionally charged dreams and tales form a secondary narrative that initially colors and eventually overwhelms the first, catching both characters and viewers in a no-exit situation.

The Open Road and the Phantom of Liberty

This brings us to the question of freedom. The question is central to the picaresque and to Buñuel's trilogy of picaresque films, although only the last film invokes it specifically. The road itself is a potent emblem of liberty. It holds out, as A.A. Parker notes, the ideal of "an autonomous life, simple, happy, free from care and unhampered by the conventions of a complex social order" (16-17). But in novel after novel this freedom turns out to be illusory, a phantom. The picaro is brought up short by material fact (often hunger) and forced to compromise with the society he despises without ever achieving the social success that would compensate for his loss of autonomy.¹⁴

Social Constraints

In the opening scene of *Discreet Charm*, the ambassador's Cadillac noses its way out of the city and into the country, but what appears to be outward movement carrying the passengers toward freedom and adventure offers a glimpse at what will become a process of constant shuttling between social contretemps. Worse yet, the other road, a mysterious highway that in another context might represent the free and easy life, represents just the contrary here. Ill attired for an expedition, the characters hurry along as though late for an appointment. The road crosses empty landscape, with no good views, no road markers, and no end in sight. Supervielle saw the huge pampa as a kind of prison, and for Borges, the desert is the ultimate labyrinth.¹⁵ Buñuel has commented more than once on his horror of open spaces: "Wide horizons—the sea, the desert—drive me crazy. I don't know what to do with them" (qtd. in Aub 155). Here he figures the open road as a form of constraint.

In scene after scene, Buñuel takes great delight in satirizing the constraining social rituals of upper-middle-class French society, which extend to even the smallest details: the men flipping open their agendas to consult about a dinner date, the women whipping out their gloves.¹⁶ Everything is compartmentalized, especially anything that verges on the unacceptable: the narcotics trade (note the line drawn between business and pleasure; the bourgeois traffickers disapprove of the army officers' marijuana habit), sex (not a topic of conversation; the Sénéchals engage in it secretly, as do Simone and Rafael; Simone and her husband, who have separate beds, apparently do not engage in it at all), and, most of all, death (the characters politely listen to horrific tales and then dismiss them with few words). Finally, the fixed smiles on Mme. Thénévot and Mme. Sénéchal seem to will away anything that is out of place.¹⁷

Like any cultural group, the French bourgeoisie derives its identity by differentiating itself from other groups, hence, the scene involving Thévenot's little "experiment" with Rafael's chauffeur. Thévenot offers Maurice a martini, which he drinks in one gulp, thus demonstrating "exactly what you should not do with a dry martini" and the superiority of those who know better. Rafael comments that "no system will ever be able to give the common people enough refinement." But, ironically, the current of snobbery will be directed increasingly against Rafael, or at least against his country, the not-so-honorable Republic of Miranda, which in the eyes of these Parisians comes to represent all that their culture is not. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White argue in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* that "the classificatory body of a culture is always double, always structured in relation to its negation, its inverse" (20).

Beyond the Pale: Miranda

Miranda is defined primarily by negatives, a whole litany of them. In a hilarious scene that recalls the discussion of the word "poncho" in *The Servant*,¹⁸ the bishop politely attempts to evoke the beauties of the republic, but he confuses it with other countries (this is not so surprising since it does not actually exist).¹⁹ Miranda, we learn, is not Colombia, Argentina, Mexico, or Guatemala, and it does not boast pampas, mountains, or pyramids. In the second dream at the colonel's, in a ritualistic humiliation scene that recalls the sort of snubbing to which the picaro was subjected, Rafael's French friends turn on him. They bring up the guerrillas, the student protesters, the absence of caviar and champagne, the gap between rich and poor, the problems of hunger, widespread corruption, and a high homicide rate, failings that characterize Miranda, "the low-Other" (Stallybrass and White 5) of France.²⁰ Their condemnation of Miranda amounts to an affirmation of the values of French civilization, but it involves

collective amnesia regarding the actual state of affairs at home.

In fact, these bourgeois have much to be discreet about. Miranda is the source of the drugs that are enriching them, and as Drouzy has suggested, the Minister for the Interior gets them out of jail because of the arms trade (229). Economically, France needs the "semisavage" Miranda. The ambassador's polished surface and rhetorical chicanery suit the French agenda very well. Real attempts at reforming Miranda's politics would be inconvenient.

In *Distant Relations* (*Una familia lejana*, 1980), a novel dedicated to Buñuel, Carlos Fuentes explores the role Latin America plays for Europe, specifically for France. He sees Latin America as an alter ego, a bad conscience that offers a means of stratifying violence and classifying it as Other, as alien to the traditions of European civilization. "We Europeans," remarks one of the characters, "know how to throw [pious veils] over our historical crimes in order to approach the spirit of reason and good taste—both of them discriminative and demanding—that characterizes France" (124).

A similar mechanism is in effect in *Discreet Charm*. The dependence is psychic as well as economic, individual as well as collective. At the personal level, Miranda stands for all that has been cast out from the charmed circle: sex and death and dirty fingernails and, of course, the narcotics that lead to subversive dreams. Rafael, as the representative of Miranda, is both their drug connection and the Latin lover who preys upon their women-folk, an essential part of their social structure yet "matter out of place" (his comment at the colonel's second dinner is that "this is not the place for me"). When he invites his friends to spend their upcoming summer holidays in Miranda as his guests, they respond with the blankest of looks.

The Ambassador and Buñuel

This returns us to the question of the picaro. Drouzy describes Rafael as a “pariah” (228), but it is important to recognize the ambivalence with which his French friends regard him, as well as his complicity in this relationship. Rafael both is and is not part of the group. Thus—to reverse Guillén’s term—he is “half-insider” and “half-outsider.” The question of his status in the film is related: is he the protagonist or just one of the gang?

There are several indications in the film that he does occupy a privileged position. He is the last dreamer in the sequence, and the first thing he does when he wakes up is raid the refrigerator, thus satisfying the need that sets the plot in motion.²¹ Rafael is the logical source for the dream involving Don Juan Tenorio (long a favorite with audiences in Spain and Spanish America), for the dream in which he is persecuted by all his French friends, and for the subsequent dream in which all these friends are massacred either by Mirandan terrorists or by Marseilles rivals. But there is no reason to limit Rafael to these dreams. Nudging the filmgoer a little, Florence tells Rafael that, according to his zodiac sign, “Your nature fights to surmount the limits of the self. Your open spirit gives you a synthetic vision of the universe.” If Rafael is the primary dreamer of the film, then the ambassador represents not only Miranda but the filmmaker.

One could argue that Rafael is a tongue-in-cheek self-portrait of Buñuel.²² As two Hispanics in a French context, they have much in common. They share a language, a culture, and a sense of displacement (the attack Rafael suffers at the hands of the French will be familiar to anyone from an underdeveloped region who travels abroad), in addition to a birthday (February 20), a zodiac sign (Pisces), and a street address (rue Maspero). At one point, Buñuel, too, represented a Hispanic country in Paris, albeit in a

less exalted capacity, serving as chief of protocol at the Spanish embassy.

Buñuel and Rafael also share certain ideas. The director joked famously about being an atheist, thank God, and Rafael, who remarks fatuously at one point that he would be a socialist if they believed in God, reveals a subversive—and rather contradictory—strain of anticlericalism; he refuses to kiss the Episcopal ring that the bishop extends to him, opting instead for an ordinary hand shake. Rafael is wary of the bishop, presumably recognizing him as a fellow rogue; the “new” church convinces him as little as it did Buñuel (see ¹³). More interesting, in his persecution dream, Rafael quotes the end of Louis Aragon’s *Treatise on Style*—“I shit on the entire French army”—before shooting the colonel. In a narrow sense, this quotation is appropriate to the situation, but it summons other meanings as well. *Treatise on Style* (1927) is an attack on just about every aspect of French bourgeois culture, especially its consumerism, and is a defense of the moral seriousness of surrealism.

Buñuel was insistent about the ethical dimension of surrealism and about the need to develop a personal moral code that would replace the platitudes of the majority culture. In the scene involving Rafael’s zodiac sign, Florence tells him, “If you want to reject other people’s ideas, you will have to replace them with your own moral code.” He replies with a double-entendre that the viewer cannot miss, “I have always done what my conscience dictates,” evoking not the moral involvement of surrealism, but the provisional morality that the picaro has always found handy.

The Crown of Discretion

Gracián uses the emblem of a hand with an eye in it—*oculata manus*—to represent the need for vigilance in a hostile society (clix). In *Discreet Charm*, the camera focuses

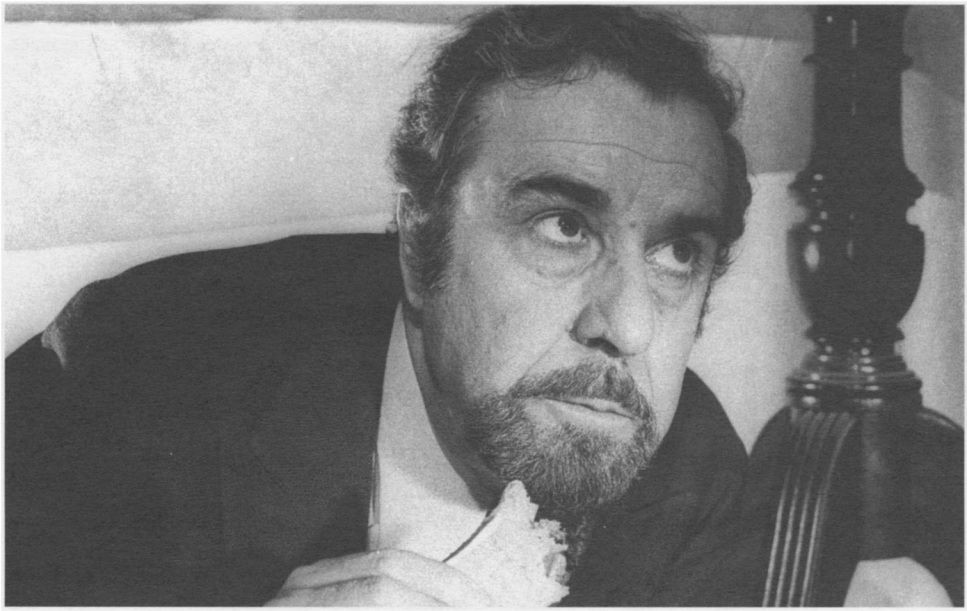


The lens of the rifle suggests the lens of the camera. A camera-rifle formed part of Buñuel's extensive collection of arms.

repeatedly on the ambassador's hand (12 close shots or actual close-ups), suggesting wariness and greed (it allows Rafael, for example, to "pat down" and to "touch up" the guerrilla, to fondle Simone's back and to grab a piece of lamb). It is a means of investigating and appropriating the world. For Florence, the cellist at the tearoom is disgusting because of his hand, which is shown fingering the instrument's strings in a masturbatory gesture. Is the idea, then, that art—or just bad art—is masturbatory (the musicians are playing "Ave Maria")? In any event, the hand suggests making as well as doing (in Spanish, the word has both meanings), and the camera's insistence here may be an allusion to Rafael's role as principal dreamer or narrator.²³ The scenes of the ambassador focusing his rifle on the terrorist below and peering through the spy hole of his door, first at Simone and then at her husband, reinforce this suggestion of the eye of the camera lens, as do the other scenes of the ambassador looking down on the street from the window.

In writing his autobiography, the picaresque projects his disenchanted vision of his own life and his own society. Rafael, Buñuel's burlesque alter ego, is the source of the satiric vision of French bourgeois culture presented in the film—a mixture of desire and disdain—and is the butt of the caricature of things Hispanic: the Franco-style government, the exaggerated machismo, the wariness and wiliness of the rogue, and, of course, the Hispanic adulation of French culture.

Finally, the film does not end with Rafael's midnight snack. The last scene, a return to the mysterious road and to the group as a whole, suggests that he is inextricably trapped with them in the confused labyrinth of contemporary life. The scene is the imprint, of the final dreamer: a Spaniard with a Mexican passport, working in Paris, a wanderer in spite of himself, familiar with the cross-cultural currents that enrich but confuse the social fabric, a discreet bourgeois, as he himself admitted (Colina and Pérez



Caught red-handed, the principal dreamer of the film.

Turrent 185), who is constantly dreaming of ways to lay bare the nightmares of social life in his own times, and to remind us, with Gracián in *El discreto*, that “the crown of discretion is nothing other than the meditation on death; because it is essential to consider it many times beforehand in order to do it well just once later on” (147). For all its French wit and “kindly spirit of humor” (Buñuel, qtd. in Colina and Pérez Turrent 186), *Discreet Charm*, reminds us as does the other humor—that fierce humor of the Spanish picaresque—of the depths that lie beneath the smooth surface of even the most discreet social life, beneath even the most polished film.

Notes

¹Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Spanish and French are my own.

²Buñuel and Carpentier were friends from the early days of surrealism and in the late 1960s, Buñuel expressed interest in filming Carpentier’s novella *Manhunt*. Although the film was never made, the two men stayed in touch, and since they were both working in the picaresque vein, it

would be surprising if they did not exchange ideas. Carpentier’s novel was not published until 1974, two years after *Discreet Charm* was filmed, but it was preceded by *Right of Sanctuary*, a short story involving an unscrupulous if amusing diplomat who relies on his wits to appropriate both the job and wife of the ambassador who gives him sanctuary.

³“Rastaquouère” (Spanish “rastacuero”) is the term with which the French designated the newly rich Latin Americans who flooded Paris during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The term literally means someone who drags his/her furs around (i.e., in an ostentatious display of wealth).

⁴All quotations come from the film and are in my translation.

⁵Carpentier makes similar use of Descartes in *Reasons of State*. The title in Spanish, *El recurso del método*, is a parodic inversion of the *Discourse on Method*; *El recurso* relates, among other things, to the abuse of Descartes’s provisional morality—again we are dealing with baroque thought—to justify the worst excesses of the dictatorial regimes in Latin America (*El D’a* 16). This is the kind of method Rafael has in mind when he explains how the government of Miranda deals with student dissidents: “What do you do with a room that’s full of flies? You grab a swatter, and bam! bam! bam!”

⁶The bishop's reversion later to an older, highly punitive form of Christianity accords with Buñuel's professed inability to believe in a kindly God: "The most incredible thing is that now they say 'God is love.' No Catholic of my generation can believe that. God was incredibly vengeful and unjust. Unjust. You could be condemned for eternity for no good reason. So now they're coming out with the other version, that God is love. They should have told me that when I was a kid. No. God is ferocious, not merciful" (qtd. in Aub 493). Just how superficial is this professed change in the church, at least in Buñuel's eyes, is demonstrated by the job the worker-bishop chooses: tending the grand bourgeois garden. His urbanity, then, is just another disguise.

⁷It would be tedious to cite all the examples of theatricality, but one is worth adding: Mme. Sénéchal's first appearance, à la Joan Crawford, dressed in a wonderfully elegant white satin at-home outfit, descending a staircase. She is handed a bouquet of flowers, but once it becomes clear that she will not be the star of this little performance—dinner, in fact, is not on—the flowers are snatched away.

⁸This inexplicable mixup is akin to an incident Buñuel describes in an interview with Max Aub. He and Cocteau make an appointment to see each other in the bar of the Carlton Hotel in Cannes. The bar is nearly empty. Buñuel waits an hour and a half and then leaves. The next day he sees Cocteau who asks him what happened. Both insist they were in the same place at the same time (123-24).

⁹Marie-Claude Taranger demonstrates this point by an extremely careful "reading" of the film. Her conclusion—that the film is therefore meaningless (122)—is not, I believe, justified.

¹⁰Agust'n Sánchez Vidal alludes to the connection between Buñuel's trilogy and Potocki's novel and also to the Wojciech J. Has film of the novel (1964). He links the trilogy as well to *Gil Blas*, a French version of the picaresque that has much in common with the novel of manners (*Obra cinematográfica* 315-16).

¹¹Given the at-best-ambivalent nature of the bishop, perhaps I should say by black magic.

¹²In *The Phantom of Liberty*, this privileging of the contingent is taken to an extreme. Here the camera seems to be the picaro, following whatever gets its attention. The result is a film that appears to be even more haphazard than *Discreet Charm*. In fact, both films were carefully mapped out.

¹³A reader of Buñuel's memoirs will be able to complete this narrative, which alludes to a

recurrent dream. He is traveling on a train that pulls in at a station. He gets off for a minute to stretch his legs and the train takes off with his bags but not him. He knows this will happen so he is very careful, but, despite his precautions, he always is left at the station. It is another story of frustration (*Mi último suspiro* 113).

¹⁴A partial exception is Lesage's *Gil Blas*; at the end of the novel, he is living in retirement from the world but is comfortably ensconced in a castle with servants and titles of nobility.

¹⁵Borges developed the idea in "The Two Kings and the Two Labyrinths." Supervielle wrote, "Precisely because of too much riding and too much freedom, and of the unchanging horizon, in spite of our desperate galloping, the pampa assumed the aspect of a prison for me, a prison that was bigger than the others" (qtd. in Bachelard 221).

¹⁶Note particularly how in both the tearoom scene and the scene in Rafael's apartment the camera focuses attention on Simone Thévenot's gloves. I do not think we need take too seriously Buñuel's assertion in an interview that the film is not satiric (Colina and Pérez Turrent 186). He could be quite cagey in commentaries on his films.

¹⁷I am thinking, too, of the mystifying exchange between Florence and Simone about dirty fingernails (whose?) and Simone's equally mysterious skin problem which makes it necessary to keep the lights off when she undresses. All these references suggest what Peter Stallybrass and Allon White call "symbolic filth" or (quoting Mary Douglas) "matter out of place" (i.e., matter related to the body's most basic needs and pleasures) (23).

¹⁸The conversation comes up in reference to the "master's" projected immigration to the Argentine. His elderly relatives identify the poncho as a kind of cowboy.

¹⁹Miranda, Prospero's daughter in *The Tempest*, is raised on a desert isle. When she first spots the inhabitants of the court (i.e., civilized society) who have been shipwrecked there, she exclaims, "How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,/That has such people in 't!" "'Tis new to thee," her father responds (V, i, 183-83). Was this Rafael's reaction when he first reached Paris? Aldous Huxley was to appropriate Miranda's exclamation as the title of his dystopian novel describing a world regulated on the basis of drugs.

²⁰Marsha Kinder writes, "The Hispanic ambassador functions as the less civilized Other and Miranda as a foreign imaginary dystopia

where all charges of political corruption can be displaced" (326). For the function of social memory in postrevolutionary France, see Terdiman.

²¹Francisco Sánchez comments without elaboration that "perhaps, as the end suggests, the whole film has been the nightmare of a fellow who went to bed without his supper" (201). In a book that came out the same year, Drouzy raises the thorny question of how long the ambassador has been dreaming (217).

²²Durnat suggests in passing that the ambassador may be an "auto-caricature: an aspect of Buñuel's internalized father-figure, an identification, a rascally sympathy, from which Buñuel derives an inspiration that is at once continuous, critical, and detached" (394). He also argues that Florence is an "auto-caricature" of Buñuel. Florence is not yet assimilated into this society (her frequent bouts of vomiting are a violent but inefficacious form of rejection), but I do not see her as a self-caricature of Buñuel.

²³See Sánchez Vidal, *El mundo de Buñuel*, for a detailed discussion of the erotic connotations of the hand in *The Andalusian Dog* and in *The Age of Gold* (62-70). His extended commentary on visual motifs in Buñuel's films is particularly interesting.

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