

Luis Bunuel

The exterminating Angel

(1962)

**Luis Buñuel**

Spanish director

**Luis Buñuel** (born February 22, 1900, Calanda, Spain—died July 29, 1983, Mexico City, Mexico) was a Spanish filmmaker who was a leading figure in [Surrealism](https://www.britannica.com/art/Surrealism), the tenets of which suffused both his life and his work. An unregenerate atheist and communist sympathizer who was preoccupied with themes of [gratuitous](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gratuitous) cruelty, eroticism, and religious mania, he won early fame with avant-garde experiments in France and then pursued an obscure career in Mexican commercial [cinema](https://www.britannica.com/art/motion-picture) before earning international acclaim with his late films made in Spain and France.

**Life and work**

Buñuel was born in Calanda, in northeastern [Spain](https://www.britannica.com/place/Spain), the eldest of seven children. His father, Leonardo, made a fortune in [Havana](https://www.britannica.com/place/Havana) selling hardware and firearms, and he subsequently returned to Spain, married a much younger woman, and settled down to the life of a country gentleman. “The fact of the matter,” Luis later said, “is that my father did absolutely nothing.” Influenced by his mother, Buñuel studied violin and [contemplated](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/contemplated) a career as a composer. He graduated from the Jesuit school in [Zaragoza](https://www.britannica.com/place/Zaragoza-Spain), Spain, where the family moved shortly after his birth, but he rejected [religion](https://www.britannica.com/topic/religion) and became a lifelong [atheist](https://www.britannica.com/topic/atheism).

Entering the University of Madrid (later [Complutense University of Madrid](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Complutense-University-of-Madrid)) in 1917, Buñuel took rooms in its Residencia des Estudiantes. A hotbed of liberal thought, the Residencia attracted young men interested in art, music, literature, and politics. Buñuel befriended two rising stars, poet and playwright [Federico García Lorca](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Federico-Garcia-Lorca) and painter [Salvador Dalí](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Salvador-Dali). Fascinated with the natural world, particularly insects, Buñuel initially hoped to become an [entomologist](https://www.britannica.com/science/entomology). Instead, his father insisted that he study engineering, a profession useful for a landowner and, moreover, respectable. Ultimately, however, he studied [philosophy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/philosophy).

In 1925 Buñuel moved to [Paris](https://www.britannica.com/place/Paris) in order to pursue a position with the emerging [League of Nations](https://www.britannica.com/topic/League-of-Nations). The job fell through, but he remained in [France](https://www.britannica.com/place/France), reviewing movies for [Madrid](https://www.britannica.com/place/Madrid) papers while acting as an extra and production assistant on such films as *Carmen* (1926; directed by [Jacques Feyder](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jacques-Feyder)), the [Josephine Baker](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Josephine-Baker) vehicle *La Sirène des tropiques* (1927; *Siren of the Tropics*), and *La Chute de la maison Usher* (1928; *The Fall of the House of Usher*), which he also cowrote. Friends made on those films, particularly actor Pierre Batcheff and cinematographer Albert Duverger, later became his collaborators.

Determined to make his mark, Buñuel asked his mother for a sum equal to the dowries [allocated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/allocated) to each of his sisters. He invested it in *Un Chien andalou* (1929; [*An Andalusian Dog*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/An-Andalusian-Dog)), a short film in [Surrealist](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Surrealist) style. Using the free-association technique pioneered by [André Breton](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Andre-Breton) and [Philippe Soupault](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Philippe-Soupault), Buñuel and Dalí wrote the film, which Buñuel directed and Duverger photographed; Batcheff played a major role. Dalí arrived from Spain only for the last days of shooting and, according to some reports, was surprised by Buñuel’s efficient management of the production and resented the evidence that he could function without him. Their friendship subsequently cooled.

Breton approved *Un Chien andalou* and admitted both Buñuel and Dalí to his tight-knit circle of Surrealists. Wealthy [dilettantes](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dilettantes) Charles and Marie-Laure de Noailles funded his second film, *L’Age d’or* (1930; [*The Golden Age*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Golden-Age-film-by-Bunuel-and-Dali)), an assault on the repression of sex by organized religion. In one of its most-controversial scenes, [Christ](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jesus) is seen leaving an orgy orchestrated by the [Marquis de Sade](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marquis-de-Sade). Before its release, [MGM](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer-Inc) put both Buñuel and the film’s star, Lya Lys, under contract, shipping them to [Hollywood](https://www.britannica.com/place/Hollywood-California). In their absence, right-wing protesters wrecked a cinema showing the film, the censor banned it, and the Noailleses fled Paris. Dalí also distanced himself from the film.[Learn More](https://premium.britannica.com/student-subscription/?utm_source=inline&utm_medium=mendel&utm_campaign=student-subscription)

Disgusted, Buñuel considered taking a long [Pacific Ocean](https://www.britannica.com/place/Pacific-Ocean) cruise. Instead, inspired by news of a new socialist republic in Spain, he hurried back to Madrid in 1930. As the fascists, the military, and the [Roman Catholic Church](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Roman-Catholicism) struggled to [stifle](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/stifle) the left, an anarchist group funded *Las Hurdes* (1933; *Land Without Bread*), his documentary about that remote impoverished [region](https://www.britannica.com/place/Las-Hurdes). In Madrid he also produced some low-budget commercial films in an attempt to build a local cinema industry, but the project collapsed as the country descended into the [Spanish Civil War](https://www.britannica.com/event/Spanish-Civil-War). Returning to Paris in 1936, Buñuel acted as a spy and a propagandist for the Republican government in exile until, fearing assassination by fascist agents, he fled with his wife and young son to the [United States](https://www.britannica.com/place/United-States). Vowing never to return to a fascist Spain, he remained in exile until 1960.

While Buñuel struggled in [New York](https://www.britannica.com/place/New-York-City), Dalí flourished, being feted by society and the media. When Buñuel asked him for a loan, Dalí refused, allegedly lecturing him on the virtues of thrift. After briefly working in Hollywood, [dubbing](https://www.britannica.com/technology/dubbing-cinema) feature films into Spanish, Buñuel was rescued by Iris Barry, the film curator at [New York’s](https://www.britannica.com/place/New-York-state) [Museum of Modern Art](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Museum-of-Modern-Art-museum-New-York-City). She employed him to revoice documentaries for the South American market and edit captured [Nazi](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Nazi-Party) films into [propaganda](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/propaganda). But his political past soon became an embarrassment, and he was forced to resign.

[scene from *Los olvidados*](https://cdn.britannica.com/50/121350-050-0FFA9E72/Scene-Los-olvidados-Luis-Bunuel.jpg)

Scene from *Los olvidados* (1950; *The Young and the Damned*), directed by Luis Buñuel.(more)

In 1946, like many left-wing blacklistees, Buñuel relocated in [Mexico](https://www.britannica.com/place/Mexico), becoming a citizen in 1949. Paradoxically, the move launched his feature career. Producer Oscar Dancigers, a [clandestine](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/clandestine) communist, hired him to direct inexpensive comedies and musicals. Buñuel planned them with such precision that they stayed within even Dancigers’s meagre budgets. After *El gran calavera* (1949; *The Great Madcap*), a success for comic Fernando Soler, Buñuel made *Los olvidados* (1950; *The Young and the Damned*), a [drama](https://www.britannica.com/art/theatre-art) of violence among slum youths in [Mexico City](https://www.britannica.com/place/Mexico-City) to which Buñuel added a subversive surrealist subtext, including a dream sequence redolent of incest. Regarded by some Mexicans as an insult, *Los olvidados* might have been suppressed had the 1951 [Cannes film festival](https://www.britannica.com/art/Cannes-film-festival) not selected it and awarded Buñuel the best director prize, after which the film screened for months in Paris and London.

Despite offers to work in Europe, Buñuel continued to live quietly and frugally with his family in Mexico City. Always delivering his films on time and under budget, he enjoyed a rare freedom to air his communist, atheist, and surrealist principles and to explore his sexual [obsessions](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/obsessions). His best Mexican films included *Ensayo de un crimen* (1955; *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz*), in which a man fetishizes the wax dummy of a woman, and *Nazarín* (1958), about a priest vainly attempting to live simply, in imitation of Christ.

Buñuel also made subversive film versions of [*Robinson Crusoe*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Robinson-Crusoe-novel), with Irish actor Dan O’Herlihy, and of [*Wuthering Heights*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Wuthering-Heights) (original title *Abismos de pasión*) in 1954. *El ángel exterminador* (1962; *The Exterminating Angel*) spun a fable about guests at a dinner party who find themselves powerless to depart and take up residence in the mansion of their hosts. The 42-minute *Simón del desierto* (1965; *Simon of the Desert*) attacked Christian [dogma](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dogma), showing all the temptations of the flesh assailing [St. Simeon Stylites](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Simeon-Stylites), who fled to the wilderness and sequestered himself on top of a column.

In 1960 Buñuel returned to Europe for the Cannes screening of *The Young One*, a racially provocative drama set on an offshore island and starring Hollywood left-wing actor Zachary Scott. Wooed by young Spanish directors and by the [Francisco Franco](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Francisco-Franco) government, he scandalized his supporters by [reneging](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/reneging) on his pledge never to work in fascist Spain, agreeing to make a feature there.

[*Viridiana*](https://cdn.britannica.com/10/90710-050-AF06F71C/Fernando-Rey-Viridiana-Luis-Bunuel.jpg)

Fernando Rey in *Viridiana* (1961), directed by Luis Buñuel.

By choosing to adapt *Halma*—a novel by the respected author of *Nazarín*, [Benito Pérez Galdós](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Benito-Perez-Galdos), about a saintly woman trying to establish a [community](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community) for the poor—Buñuel convinced the authorities of his good intentions. In practice, his version, retitled [*Viridiana*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Viridiana) (1961), discarded most of Galdós’s work, substituting the story of the pious Viridiana who visits her wealthy uncle and guardian before entering a convent. When she resists his attempts at seduction, he hangs himself with her childhood skipping rope, its suggestively phallic wooden handles prominently displayed. In the film’s famous banquet scene, the mob of [derelicts](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/derelicts) that Viridiana has subsequently tried to help freezes in a tableau precisely replicating [Leonardo da Vinci](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Leonardo-da-Vinci)’s *Last Supper* while, to the “Hallelujah Chorus” from [George Frideric Handel](https://www.britannica.com/biography/George-Frideric-Handel)’s *Messiah*, a crone “photographs” the diners by lifting her skirt to expose herself. The Franco regime rushed to suppress the film, but in a stratagem of surrealist eccentricity, Buñuel’s son had already smuggled the negative into France hidden in a van carrying a team of bullfighters.

After *Viridiana* won the Palme d’Or at Cannes, Buñuel alternated between Paris and Mexico City. In France he adapted [Octave Mirbeau](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Octave-Mirbeau)’s *Le journal d’une femme de chambre* (1964; *The Diary of a Chambermaid*), exposing the French [bourgeoisie](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bourgeoisie) as closet fetishists, and he attacked sexual repression in [*Belle de jour*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Belle-de-jour) (1967; “Beauty of the Day”), adapting Joseph Kessel’s novel of a middle-class woman who finds guilty pleasure in working afternoons as a prostitute. [Catherine Deneuve](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Catherine-Deneuve)’s performance in the lead role was widely acclaimed.)

His later French films—including *[Tristana](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tristana)* (1970), again starring Deneuve; *Le Charme discret de la bourgeoisie* (1972; [*The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Discreet-Charm-of-the-Bourgeoisie)); and *Cet obscur objet du désir* (1977; *That Obscure Object of Desire*)—all trade in Buñuel’s first and only real belief system, surrealism. In this world, society rests precariously on a swamp of repression and suppressed violence from which, periodically, dreams erupt, [goading](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/goading) superficially civilized people into actes gratuits during which they cast aside the facade of propriety to fornicate and kill. As Buñuel whiled away his afternoons in one of many favourite bars, sipping his signature sweet [martini](https://www.britannica.com/topic/martini) cocktail, the Buñueloni, he found quiet satisfaction in watching society at last catch up with what he had been saying all his life.

Buñuel’s autobiography—*My Last Sigh*, ghosted by longtime collaborator Jean-Claude Carriere—was published in 1983, the year of his death, but he remained intensely private to the end, committed only to his work. “I hate publicity,” Buñuel said in 1960. “It makes the good things, the human things, disappear. I care only what my friends think. And money? If I made too much, I might stop working.” Of Buñuel’s often contradictory personal philosophy, [Orson Welles](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Orson-Welles) remarked aptly, “He is a deeply Christian man, and he hates God as only a Christian can.”

The dinner guests arrive twice. They ascend the stairs and walk through the wide doorway, and then they arrive again--the same guests, seen from a higher camera angle. This is a joke and soon we will understand the punch line: The guests, having so thoroughly arrived, are incapable of leaving0:01 / 00:15

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

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

The dinner party is a success. The guests whisper slanders about each other, their eyes playing across the faces of their fellow guests with greed, lust and envy. After dinner, they stroll into the drawing room, where we glimpse a woman's purse, filled with chicken feathers and rooster claws. A doctor predicts that one of the women will be bald within a week. But the broader outlines of the gathering seem normal enough: Drinks are passed, the piano is played, everyone looks elegant in dinner dress.Then, in a series of subtle developments, it becomes apparent that no one can leave. They make preliminary gestures. They drift toward the hallway. There is nothing to stop them. But they cannot leave. They never exactly state that fact; there is an unspoken, rueful acceptance of the situation, as they make themselves comfortable on sofas and rugs.

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

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

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

His firmest conviction was that most people were hypocrites--the sanctimonious and comfortable most of all. He also had a streak of nihilism; in one film, a Christ figure, saddened by the sight of a dog tied to a wagon spoke and too tired to keep up, buys the dog to free it. As he does, another dog tied to another wagon limps past unnoticed in the background.By the time he came to make "The Exterminating Angel" in 1962, Bunuel's career was on its delayed upswing. He had made a great international hit, "[Viridiana](https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-viridiana-1961)," in 1960; it won many festival prizes and represented his return to Spain after decades overseas. But its central image--a scandalous tableau re-creating the Last Supper--displeased the Spanish censors, and he was back in Mexico again and primed for bitter satire when he made "The Exterminating Angel."

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

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

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

Bunuel belongs to a group of great directors who obsessively reworked the themes that haunted them. There is little stylistically to link Ozu, Hitchcock, Herzog, Bergman, Fassbinder or Bunuel, except for this common thread: Some deep wound or hunger was imprinted on them early in life, and they worked all of their careers to heal or cherish it. Bunuel was born in 1900, so the dates of his films correspond to the years of his life. He had the most remarkable late flowering in movie history. His Mexican films of the 1940s and '50s are often inspired--especially "Los Olvidados" (1950) and "The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz" and "El" (both 1955). "Viridiana" was his international comeback, and then came "The Exterminating Angel," which he said might be his last film--but the curtain was just rising on the great days of his career. His most famous film, "[Belle de Jour](https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-belle-de-jour-1967)" (1967), won the grand prize at Venice. It starred [Catherine Deneuve](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/catherine-deneuve) as a respectable Parisian housewife who becomes fascinated by a famous bordello and finds herself working there two or three afternoons a week.At the prize ceremony at Venice, Bunuel again announced his retirement. Not quite. In 1970, he starred Deneuve again, in "[Tristana](https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/tristana-1970)," a morbid romance between an aging pederast and the woman he adopts, mistreats and loses. After her leg is amputated, she returns to him for support, and revenge.

Then came three great films in which Bunuel's talent flowed in a great liberated stream of wicked satire and cheerful obsession. "[The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie](https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-the-discreet-charm-of-the-bourgeoisie-1972)" (1972), which won the Oscar as best foreign film, is a reversal of "Exterminating Angel." This time dinner guests are forever sitting down to a feast, but repeatedly frustrated in their desire to eat. Then came "[The Phantom of Liberty](https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-phantom-of-liberty-1995)" (1974), a free-form film that began with one group of characters, then followed another, and another. His last film was "[That Obscure Object of Desire](https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/that-obscure-object-of-desire-1978)" (1977), about an aging man who believes one woman and no other can satisfy his desires; Bunuel had the woman played interchangeably by two different actresses.

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