EXTERMINATING THE DEMON: GETTING OUT OF HUMANITY’S TRAP IN BUÑUEL’S
THE EXTERMINATING ANGEL (1962)

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The article proposes an alternative interpretation for Buñuel’s movie El Ángel Exterminador / The Exterminating Angel, based on various theories of the human mind, thought and language –both of the Western and the Oriental traditions. It is argued that, alongside some of the typical Buñuel-esque topics found in the film –e.g., a fierce critique of the utter triviality and hypocrisy of the high Bourgeoisie’s lifestyle, and the claustrophobic confinement Religion and the Church invariably impose on the minds of their believers-captives– there also exists material in the movie, which opens up some alternative interpretative possibilities of an all-encompassing character. According to this approach, The Exterminating Angel emerges as a powerful metaphor for the illusive nature of our thought-language apparatuses, and by extension, on the probably fictitious –and hence, inexistent– nature of all our human psychological problems.

Keywords: Freud, Hume, Nietzsche, Krishnamurti, Buñuel

Introduction

At a given moment in Buñuel’s The Exterminating Angel¹ (1962), Blanca plays a sonata by Paradisi at the piano, then many of the guests congratulate her, one of them invites her to play also something by Scarlatti, and she denies, saying it is too late, and that she is too tired. Her statement is humorously contested by Edmundo, who opposes that “this is the most intimate and pleasant hour of the whole evening”, and this short piece of dialogue seems to be the one that triggers a strange process of entrapment of the fellow diners within the confines of the room of the Nobile’s house where they have gathered.
Towards the end of the movie, when adversity has reached its peak for the fellow diners, Leticia—in a typically psychoanalytic manner—comes up with the observation that after such a long time of continuous reshuffling of the dinner’s guests within the room, they are paradoxically found back again to their initial positions, just when Blanca was about to sit at the piano and play the Paradisi sonata. Perhaps, by solely recomposing the exact chain of events (and the respective dialogues which accompanied them), one could deviate their route towards the desired end—the exodus from the room.

Far from this seemingly Freudian solution which Buñuel gives to his film, this essay proposes that with it Buñuel might have wished to make a metaphor for the human condition in general. In the film, apart from some of his notorious recurring fetishes—e.g., Religion and Bourgeoisie— he also seems to be lashing out at some other well-established givens. Freud’s psychoanalysis is also targeted and completely deconstructed via Buñuel’s familiar derisory approach. Most importantly, though, it is the human condition in its totality, that is deconstructed—almost scorned— in *The Exterminating Angel*. At the end of his enigmatic creation, Buñuel seems to be telling us that all of our efforts to tackle our innumerable human problems are probably pointing towards the wrong direction. It is more: they are almost ridiculous in their complexity and supposed scientificity. He goes yet a step further to suggest that our problems themselves might well be a mere product of our mind’s structure and that as such, they do not correspond to any reality whatsoever. If these were so, there might exist a unique “Solution” to our one and only “Problem”, namely, that no problem exists at all in reality, and thereby, no solution at all is needed either.

**Reminiscence Converted to Trauma**

Within a Freudian context, memories of a traumatic nature lived by the patient earlier in his life—mostly during his childhood—are violently repressed by his conscious down to the unconscious, only to bounce back to him at later times in life, already transformed into neurotic symptoms, presenting themselves as images of such a vividness that they almost coincide with reality in his disturbed mental situation (Freud “Studies on Hysteria” 51 and 168 and “Five Lectures...” 2203).
“Hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences” asserts Freud (“Studies on Hysteria” 10 and “On Psychoanalysis” 2545); meaning that their sufferings, of a bodily etiology and symptomatology at first sight, might, in fact, be simply “hallucinations of pain” –as contrasted to real pain– “determined directly by ideation” (“Studies on Hysteria” 168). First, a really traumatic fact, or –more frequently– a fact misinterpreted by the hysteric’s distorted perception apparatus is deposited in his memory, then its immediate repression down to the unconscious takes place, due exactly to its disturbing and painful character.

Memory seems to be the mechanism, which in most cases has given birth to such “ideogenic” (“Studies on Hysteria” 170). hallucinations of which the neuropaths suffer. First and foremost because “There is, in general, no guarantee of the data produced by our memory” (“Screen Memories” 496). Indeed, alongside its mere storing function, one must also acknowledge memory’s distortive nature as well. Stimuli of the external environment are subjectively interpreted by our perception mechanism –most frequently in a distortive manner– and are subsequently stored in our memory depository. Actually, memory is the product of the accumulation of layers upon layers of such old and distorted interpretations ² of reality. When recalled, later in an individual’s life, they are by definition, something irrelevant to the real facts, which triggered them back in the distant past. As Nietzsche has put it, memory can be conceived of as the set of all our “previous false causal fictions” (The Will to Power 266).

To such an extent, that even Freud himself has doubted whether we can assert at all that we really have memories from our childhood and not merely memories just vaguely related to our childhood; at best, these “childhood memories” of ours “... show us our earliest years not as they were but as they appeared at the later periods when the memories were aroused” (“Screen Memories” 503).

The mediatory agent leading from normality straight to pathogenesis is language, as Josef Breuer –Freud’s close collaborator during the initial steps of psychoanalysis– recognized correctly: “What unites the affect and its reflex is often some ridiculous play upon words or associations by sound” (“Studies on Hysteria” 187). So, word (“some ridiculous play upon words”) and memory (“associations”) can under certain circumstances lead to neurosis; more specifically, when the basic condition of psychic health according to Freud, namely, that “the
nervous apparatuses of the complexes of organs which are of vital importance – the circulatory and digestive organs – are separated by strong resistances from the organs of ideation” does not hold any more, i.e., when these “vital organs” come to be “affected directly by ideas” (“Studies on Hysteria” 181).

It must be through the same means – language and memory – that things could probably be brought back to normality again, Freud speculated: “... each individual hysterical symptom immediately and permanently disappeared” when he succeeded in simultaneously “... bringing clearly to light the memory of the event by which it was provoked and in arousing its accompanying affect”, and “... when the patient had described that event in the greatest possible detail and had put the affect into words” (“Studies on Hysteria” 227).

This last point can be thought of as an inclusive definition of Freud’s “psychoanalytic method”. Everything begins when an idea perceived by the patient’s consciousness as dangerous for his overall psychic stability appears. Immediately, “... A psychical force” is activated in the patients’ psychic world, which is opposed to “the pathogenic ideas becoming conscious (being remembered)” (“Studies on Hysteria” 237), and this, according to Freud, is the most difficult obstacle the therapist has to deal with: it is the mechanism of “resistance”, the Ego’s defense mechanism, which will subsequently try to repress the idea-intruder deep down into the patient’s unconscious (“Five Lectures...” 2231), i.e., it will force the patient to forget it, to destroy any associative link which might revive it and bring it back to the conscious level. Through this defensive mechanism, the idea has already become pathogenic, and neurosis is the normal outcome of the whole process (“Studies on Hysteria” 237). We can already discern in the Freudian syllogism an implicit deep schism between at least two antagonistic entities found in the field of human consciousness, the one distancing itself from the other, the one trying to subsume or eliminate the other.

Filling in the mnemonic gap created by the repression of one or more “strangulated affects” is the way to restore good psychic health, according to Freud’s psychoanalytic method (“Five Lectures...” 2207-2208). Forcing the patient to reproduce in his memory what it forcibly repressed for being unpleasant, as well as to exteriorize it verbally, is the key to restituting good health (Freud “Five Lectures...” 2203 and “Studies on Hysteria” 9 and 65). This “filling in” the
problematic “mnemonic gaps” must be done by a professional, the analyst, according to Freud, who assumes the role of the “objective observer” as opposed to the heavily biased mental and psychic apparatuses of the patient. Again, a sharp division between censor and censored, repressor and repressed, analyzer and analyzed, seems to be lying at the very foundation of the Freudian system.

Liberation can only come through the word, verbalization, Freud believed. Saying means remembering the traumatic pieces of memory, which have violently been repulsed by the patient’s “Ego”. If one could somehow remember (actually, “repeat”) the exact chain of events, which produced his specific neurotic symptoms, then, Freud speculated, the latter should deterministically be dissolved at once (“Five Lectures...” 2213; “Remembering...” 2498-2501; and “On the Psychical Mechanism...” 290).

It is exactly this Freudian methodology the one which Buñuel recomposes in The Exterminating Angel, in the scene already mentioned, when Leticia suggests bringing back to the group’s collective memory the exact chain of events –and words pronounced– after Blanca finished playing that Paradisi sonata.

We can already discern Freud’s two major mistakes: the first one, as already insinuated, is that he believed in the twofold capacity of language to both lead to neurosis and liberate from it; the second one is that he took for granted the reality of memory by merely believing in the reality of one of its manifold manifestations –ideational itself– that of the “analyzer”, be it internal (the patient’s “Ego”, his “I” entity), or external (the psychoanalyst).

The Flimsy Grounds of Language

“Telling things is a relief” (“Studies on Hysteria” 189) believed Breuer, and it was on this maxim that the whole foundations of the Freudian system were laid. The question arises naturally: could ever the mere verbalization of a traumatic memory lead to any psychological liberation whatsoever? Absolutely not, given that language is only an abstraction of real things found in nature: the blue color “... would still be there even if language had not bothered at all to make an abstraction out of the adjective ‘blue’ ...” explains the Austrian philosopher Fritz Mauthner (Contribuciones 40). Exactly like electricity, “which had also been out there well
before it was even discovered, that is before our senses were able to perceive it”,

Language is a double metaphor, according to Nietzsche: “… a nervous impulse extrapolated into an image! First metaphor. The image transformed into a sound! Second metaphor” (Sobre verdad y mentira... 26).

All we know about the world that surrounds us is through the words we use to describe it, and all our thought is equally expressed by the words of which our language consists. The understanding we have about our universe is delimited by the specific meanings we have attributed to it, i.e., the specific images or concepts we have attached to the words we use to describe it, so that language and thought mechanism in fact coincide: “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (Wittgenstein 111).

Equivalently formulated, in Korzybski’s words: “A map is not the territory it represents” (Selections 24). Or else, believing in the exact coincidence between our thought-language and the objective world is one of our biggest illusions. As Wittgenstein put it: “A proposition can only say how a thing is, not what this thing is” (58). A principle of universal validity this one, which also applies to the things of our inner world. The content of our consciousness is also made up of images, whose sonic correlates –words– are nothing more than signs only referring to the thing, describing it, but never the thing itself: “The word is not the thing” as J. Krishnamurti repeatedly emphasized during his life (“Exploration...” 146; “The Way of Intelligence” 160; “Krishnamurti’s Notebook” 26).

Therefore, our words seem to be mere sonic designators for all the things of the world – outer and inner– and as such, they are completely impotent with a view to solving any kind of human psychological problem. Our consciousness is filled with a vast bundle of such sonic, optic, and other mental descriptors –words, images, concepts– whose only practical value seems to have been that they tried to describe a real thing of the world at a specific moment in the past, and then, already in the next instant, they were irrevocably converted in dead mnemonic residuals. Human consciousness as a peculiar kind of “metaphysics of language”, or else, “in plain English, of reason”, which in nothing differs from any other “system of fetishism” created by us (Nietzsche Twilight of Idols 19-20); according to Nietzsche, the totality of our consciousness’ content with its innumerable splits –“doer” and “deed”, “ego” and “Being”,

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“thing” and “will”, etc.– is nothing more than mere words (Ibidem). And Freud’s technique apparently collapses exactly at this point, for having attributed an almost magic quality to both language and word (“Introductory Lectures...” 3131); for having naively believed that only remembrance and its verbalization can undo the bad, which was exactly created by reminiscence and word.

**Analyzer analyzing himself**

Before fully understanding the problem Buñuel’s characters are facing in *The Exterminating Angel* we should first answer the question who is going to be the entity that will assume the role of the “objective observer”, the “analyzer”, who will manage to successfully unfold complex chains of past mnemonic associations, bringing back to the conscious long-ago lost and heavily distorted mnemonic fragments in the patient’s consciousness, the one who –in fulfilment of Freud’s old recipe– will convert the missing pieces of the puzzle into liberating words, and at last, make the demons disappear.

Freud laid the whole burden on the patient himself; however, he stressed emphatically the fact that the physician’s presence is the *conditio sine qua non* for the therapeutic process to be successful. Buñuel, at first glance, seems to be in accord with Freud’s basic claim: indeed, magic is completely resolved only when Leticia assumes the role of the psychoanalyst, i.e., of the supposedly “objective observer”, or “analyzer”, and manages to reproduce memories and words, to restore any lost mnemonic rings, and divert them both towards the desired end: the final exodus from the room. Another kind of mind sorcery this one, no doubt.

Nietzsche would have strongly opposed such a narrative as extremely naive, though. He would surely have labeled it as fanciful, at least: what the “analyzer” perceives as a “cause” is most probably just its opposite, namely, an effect provoked by some exogenous stimulus, which subsequently reverberates back to his so-called “inner world” under the guise of a cause. Here lies the “inversion” of the “chronological order of cause and effect” Nietzsche has talked about (*The Will to Power* 265) which, in another context, he labeled as “the intrinsic perversion of reason” (*Twilight of Idols* 29). Many successive layers of such previous “inner experiences”, or else, previous attributions of fictitious “causalities” to mere effects of exogenous stimuli upon
our consciousness are accumulated one over the other until the apparatus of our memory is solidified in that peculiar entity of the “observer”, the “analyzer” – the “Ego” in Freudian terms. However, anything which has been built upon erroneous foundations must be erroneous in its totality as well: as humans, “… so far we have incorporated only our errors” in what stands for our “inner world”, to such an extent that one can definitely be sure that “… all our consciousness refers to errors”, as Nietzsche has asserted elsewhere (Gay Science 37).

What seems to be in motion in every “psycho-analytic” process – much more in a “self-analytic” one – is a kind of anthropomorphic short-circuit: a futile effort of the “analyzer” to somehow “understand” himself and explain it back to himself, using the same means that he himself has invented – language, reason, analysis. Apparently, such a mechanism can never explain anything to anybody – much less to itself – however many disguises it might wear, that of an “analyzer”, an “observer”, an “I”, an “Ego”, etc. It is an entity condemned to be trying eternally to get rid of the invisible obstacle of its own making, preventing it from just walking out of the door.

David Hume must have been thinking much in a similar way when he wrote in his Treatise of Human Nature: “… we may observe, that what we call a mind, is nothing but a heap or collection of different perceptions, united together by certain relations, and supposed, though falsely, to be endowed with a perfect simplicity and identity” (Kindle 2011 90). If any “identity” perceived by our human mind is a product of such a perennial accumulation of mnemonic residues, of immaterial representations of some real, external stimuli, heavily distorted by our incomplete human sensory organs; if it is nothing more than a pile of verbalized schemata, more belonging to our internal ideational psychic world than to the outer objective reality; then our own identity, our “Ego”, might also well be something fictitious, unreal, probably just another agonic attempt of man to define and “know” himself (Nietzsche Gay Science 212-213), to somehow organize his puzzling inner world and feel like the one who is in command of the things and not manipulated by them; an agonic attempt to feel secure.

It must be true: our “identity” – our “self”, our “person” – are nothing more than “… that to which our several impressions and ideas are supposed to have a reference” (Hume 107), hence nothing more than a “bundle” of impressions stored up in our memory. We are the ones
who have attributed this inner sense of “identity” to this accidental heap of impressions, memories, and ideas, apparently for no other reason than that of giving some sense of continuity to our limited and fragmented perception mechanism. Man should at last seriously consider the possibility that this so-called “perception” of ours, “the causal connection between thoughts, feelings, desires, between subject and object” –as Nietzsche has described it– is “perhaps purely imaginary” (The Will to Power 264); something which, in the last analysis, would mean that –again, according to Nietzsche– our consciousness, this “idea of an idea” (The Will to Power 263) is only phenomenal and superficial, and hence, inexistent. It does not constitute a fact as we have probably thought; at best, it only refers to real facts; it does not correspond to factual entities and categories objectively observable in the real world, but instead, it only consists of “subsequent and derivative intellectual phenomena” (The Will to Power 264), and hence, it only “… gives rise to countless mistakes that lead an animal or human being to perish sooner than necessary” (Nietzsche Gay Science 37).

Under this optic, our whole thought-game is an imaginary one. It is a cyclical\(^9\) one as well: we ourselves have “imagined” both our thinking –“an act … which simply does not occur” (Nietzsche The Will to Power 264)– as well as that peculiar entity within us, which thinks that it is thinking in reality –in Nietzsche’s words, the “subject-substratum in which every act of thinking, and nothing else, has its origin” (Ibidem). This would practically mean that “both the deed and the doer are fictions” (Ibidem).

An idea this one that reminds us of the dipole “observer” and “observed” coined by Jiddu Krishnamurti, the great philosopher and educator of the twentieth century who knew how to harmoniously entwine traditional Oriental wisdom and Western pragmatism. According to Krishnamurti,\(^10\) there exists a state of mind where the “observer” –the “I”, the “Ego”– stops distancing itself from what it observes inside and around it, once it realizes that it is a fictitious entity created exactly by that “heap” of accumulated memories, experiences, and erroneous subjective interpretations as insinuated by Freud, Nietzsche, and Hume; when it comes to the understanding that “Analysis of the hidden implies the observer and the observed, the censor and the thing that is judged. In this there is not only conflict but the observer himself is conditioned, and his evaluation, interpretation, can never be true; it will be crooked, perverted”
(Krishnamurti *On Fear* 98). And this is exactly what we have been doing as humans since time immemorial.

Under this prism, the whole Freudian system would obviously collapse; its very notional foundations would have been canceled in their totality: the assumption of the existence of an objective “analyzer”, either inside or outside of us; the assumption of the existence of a causal chain, supposedly governing the entirety of our psychic world, which under certain circumstances can be disrupted and lead to neurosis, and under the exactly reverse circumstances it can be restored to its former logical continuity and coherence leading back to sanity; the overall deterministic approach towards human psychic health; in sum, the utopic belief in man’s capacity to logically control and mold at will a psychic ‘entity’ which he has erroneously identified as himself; here lie the basic philosophical deficiencies of Freud’s system.

Under this same logic, Buñuel’s characters in *The Exterminating Angel* are not in reality physically entrapped within the room. Mental, psychical, or even better, verbal entrapment would be some more proper terms for describing their peculiar condition. It must be some obscure and complicated functions of their own brains, which keep them imprisoned within the strictly delimited spatial boundaries of the room. The Freudian approach, which Buñuel invokes for a moment –even though reproduced by him in an exemplary manner– cannot apparently solve such a kind of problem; additionally, we have quite many reasons to believe that Buñuel has been well aware of this fact, as we proceed to explain.

**Mocking Freud?**

Buñuel is well informed of the Freudian method in *The Exterminating Angel*. All of the components of Freudian psychoanalysis are present in the scene with Leticia, when she undertakes the task of recomposing the past in the fellow diners’ memory, of making them verbalize it, and when finally, liberates them from their collective neurosis. However, it is exactly this Freudian basis of his syllogism, which is problematic in itself, as it has already been shown. A thorough critique of both human language and consciousness is needed before we uncritically accept its validity.
As to Buñuel’s stance towards the Freudian method in the movie one more basic question has to be answered: despite its methodological correctness on the surface, how much veracious does it really seem that what has actually been missing for the fellow diners to be free to leave has been just a simple reproduction in their memory of a rather insignificant chain of events and a slightly different dénouement for the equally insignificant, if not derisory, piece of dialogue they happened to hold as their nocturne gathering was heading towards its end? Is this a kind of a joke? Are we in front of a serious Freudian approach on behalf of Buñuel, or is it just another recurrence of his familiar irony and corrosive mockery against any established system created by the humans, Freud’s psychoanalysis included?

Buñuel has certainly been a profound connoisseur of psychoanalysis, as he himself attests in his memoirs: “... my discovery of Freud, and particularly his theory of the unconscious, was crucial to me” (My Last Breath 229). It is more: initially, he even appeared to favor a psychoanalytic approach to the interpretation of his films. However, being a “fanatical antifanatic” (My Last Breath 228) by nature, it did not take him much to end up despising psychoanalysts as much as any other kind of “seers, prophets, and psychics”: “For that matter, I don’t like psychology in general. Or analysis. Or psychoanalysis. I have some close analyst friends who’ve written about my films, which is their prerogative, of course; but most of what they say makes no sense to me” (My Last Breath 228). And this is exactly our feeling, while we are watching The Exterminating Angel: it does not make any sense! We cannot avoid constantly asking ourselves why actually do the fellow diners have to suffer all this weary psychoanalytic process until they can just get out of the room’s open doors and go home.

Buñuel’s aversion towards analysis in general –psychoanalysis included– is further documented in his memoirs, with the story of his first encounter with the formal psychoanalytic establishment in the U.S.A. Willing to make a movie about schizophrenia, he was once introduced to Franz Gabriel Alexander (1891-1964) –one of Freud’s disciples–, by then running a clinic in Chicago. Buñuel remembered that Carl Jung had once described his Un chien andalou as a fine example of dementia praecox, and thought it opportune to pass a copy of his film to Dr. Alexander. The answer came to Buñuel in writing after he had returned to New York, informing him that Alexander had seen the film but that he was “scared to death” (My Last Breath 230),
giving thus a precocious and abrupt end to their prospective collaboration. Buñuel’s reaction was logical enough, contesting the seriousness of such a “doctor” as well as of his entire discipline: “I found his reaction incredible –what kind of a doctor would use that sort of language? Would you tell your life story to a psychologist who was ‘scared to death’ by a movie? How could anyone take this man seriously?” (My Last Breath 230).

Before this incident happened, though, while still in Chicago, Buñuel had the chance to wander about the floors of the clinic for a while, and understand very well both the classist character and the futility of psychoanalysis: “Yet just as psychology seems a somewhat arbitrary discipline, forever contradicted by human behavior, so is psychoanalysis severely limited, a form of therapy reserved for the upper classes” (My Last Breath 229).

Apart from this innate aversion for any kind of systematic dogma and concomitant formal institution that so markedly characterized him, Buñuel has first and foremost been a Surrealist. And, if Freud’s psychoanalysis –as a major humanist current within the broader Modernist moment– sought “… to add meaning to the ‘manifest content,’ [of the dream] as Freud called it …” (Durgnat 32-44), through analysis and rational dissection, the Surrealists rather contemplated the dream in its very poetic actuality and mystery (Babington 5-20). Dream was seen as “a value in itself” (Babington 6), and especially Buñuel, among the rest of the Surrealists, was clearly much more interested in “the mystery and opaqueness of his oneiric experiences than in analyzing himself through them with the tools provided by Freud” (Babington 7). It is because of this first significant differentiation between Buñuel’s surrealism and Freud’s psychoanalysis, that Stone and Gutiérrez-Albilla correctly note “… that Buñuel’s films challenge an orthodox psychoanalytic practice and theory that insists on the codification of the unconscious by privileging the productive freedom of the signifier instead” (11).

Furthermore, being in the knowledge that “one of Surrealism’s basic tenets –derived from Dada” (Havard 199)–, to which Buñuel also passionately adhered, has been humor [“Surrealism was born as a humorous weapon, it was based on humor as a liberating force” (Ibidem)], while bearing simultaneously in mind ‘Buñuel’s abhorrence of the so-called pillars of society which Surrealism targeted: religion, nationhood, family and culture” (Havard 174), we are in the right to assume, that with his Exterminating Angel, Buñuel has also wished to
humorously—but no less poignantly—target Freud’s psychoanalysis, as one more among the many established “pillars of society”, which every militant Surrealist should have a duty to demolish. And this would render a second—far more important—schism between Buñuel’s highly idiosyncratic cinematic Surrealism and psychoanalysis, effectuated with his typical weapons of irony and mockery.

And it happens that *The Exterminating Angel* itself offers us plenty of evidence towards this assumption of Buñuel mocking Freud: no dialogue or chain of incidents like these ones could ever have been perceived as so much traumatic as to provoke a catastrophe like the one the movie’s characters have to endure in the film. The apparent exaggeration in what is happening in front of our eyes cannot be denied, at any rate. Of course, one would expect that the neuroses suffered by the high Bourgeoisie would normally be due to some more frivolous and rather insignificant “traumatic” experiences than the ones suffered by, say, the working class. However, one can hardly imagine a Paradisi sonata leading to such a severe collective neurosis with so devastating effects. Furthermore, a trivial—almost ridiculous—Freudian solution to the plight like the one Buñuel offers is at least unconvincing. No, he cannot have been serious in this one. He is navigating extremely easily within the Freudian universe, but he does not vacillate in contesting it as well. And he does so, by depriving it of any remnant of seriousness and validity it might still possess, exactly the way Surrealism’s basic “tenet” according to Buñuel—humor—demands; and with exactly the same liberating effect: the open door of the room lies constantly in front of the fellow diners’ eyes, as well as in front of ours, insistently asking why do not they just get out of the house. Psychoanalysis—in fact, any kind of analysis or introspection—must be exterminated as well.

Buñuel’s characters in *The Exterminating Angel* suffer from a radically different kind of problem. In reality, they are free to go from the beginning to the end. And yet they will not. They cannot. There is nothing over there impeding them, and at the same time, there does seem to be something. Nothing visible or tangible—it is true—but something which is acting at a completely different level or dimension, and yet not anything metaphysic at all. Their obstacle is certainly a mental one. And, as such, it cannot be solved by any traditional means of analysis, introspection, or external intervention whatsoever. There might be a solution for them—a much
simpler one— if they only were able to contemplate their weird situation in a radically different manner.

**Mind games**

Mind tricks like the one they are suffering from are not completely unknown to us — the deceptive nature of human mind and its propensity towards problem creation, in general, has repeatedly been pointed out by most of the Oriental religious and philosophic traditions since time immemorial. The Sufi master Shibli’s story comes to mind: when he was asked about who had been his real teacher in the Path, he answered that it had actually been a dog: being in desperate thirst and after vacillating for long by the water’s edge, frightened by the reflection of what he thought was another dog, he finally decided to leap into the water — his necessity superseding his fear— only to realize that the real obstacle had actually been himself; in fact, only an image of what he thought himself was (Rajneesh *Until You Die* 210).

A story whose correlate we also find in the Zen Buddhist tradition: Chiyono, the Zen monk, despite her intense efforts for years, did not manage to get enlightened until one night, while she was carrying a pail filled with water and watching the full moon reflected in it, suddenly, the pail broke, letting the water rush out, making the moon’s reflection disappear. A marvelous metaphor for the nature of human mind: we are this heap of reflections inside of us; the whole content of our consciousness is nothing more than a heap of reflected images on the water’s surface. The basic error we go on committing regarding our inner world is that we constantly take mere reflections for real things. In reality, there is “no water – no moon”, deep inside of us, as Chiyono was finally forced to conclude (Rajneesh *No Water, no Moon* 2).

There might exist a life for man which “... would be possible without, as it were, seeing itself in a mirror”, the mirror of human consciousness (Nietzsche *Gay Science* 212). Man could somehow manage to live without being “disturbed by the sight of his own shadow”, “displeased with his own footsteps”, running desperately away from them, until he falls dead of exhaustion, as happens with the man of one of Zhuang-Zi’s stories. Zhuang Zi’s verdict for the poor man in the story is that “He failed to realize that if he merely stepped into the shade, his shadow would vanish, and if he sat down and stayed still, there would be no more footsteps”
Rajneesh *When the Shoe Fits* 34). The “problem” of Zhuang Zi’s man is also one created solely by himself; one of shadows and reflections; hence, completely inexistent; in this sense, it resembles the one Buñuel’s characters are facing.

Don Luis seems to have been intuitively aware of this kind of possibility: that it is all about mind games and self-deception in human affairs and so-called psychological problems; that his movie itself is nothing more than a hallucinatory trick, playing with the deceptive character of the human mind. If this is so, he proves to be a true Western master of the irrational, the way a Zen master would be it. He has provided us with all the necessary material for going a step further with the movie, of posing a completely different sort of questions as to his characters’ “problem”, and thus reaching a far easier and all-inclusive solution to it. A multitude of alternative interpretative possibilities to the movie—of a far more existential and universal utility—open up this way. We have Buñuel’s consent to explore them. We do so in what follows.

**The profound wound of humanity**

It might then well be that no problem existed at all from the beginning, and hence, no “analyzer” and no solution—Freudian or other—were possibly needed. It could well be that all our human problems are, in fact, nothing more than imaginary creations of our own mind—mere mind games—hallucinations provoked by the peculiar accumulative, associative, and distortive nature of our memory and thought mechanisms. And Freud’s analogy—that neuroses in nothing differ from a guy shedding tears before a monument commemorating “… the reduction of his beloved metropolis to ashes”, which has taken place somewhere in the distant past—might indeed be valid (“Five Lectures…” 2206). Neurotic symptoms could well be mere “mnemic symbols of particular (traumatic) experiences” much like a monument is a mnemic symbol of something that irrevocably belongs to the past; being so much emotionally attached to such “mnemic symbols” surely constitutes a completely irrational stance towards life on our behalf. It would be far more fructiferous for a living man or woman to turn an eye towards real life—his or her beloved one, to use Freud’s example—, than mourning some ashes of the past.
According to this insight, Buñuel’s characters would be doing something similarly silly in the movie: they would be stubbornly clinging to some kind of an inexistent phobic obsession of their own making, one that even their creator, Buñuel, seems to be making fun of. They are the ones who have imagined their own neurosis, and the ones who think that they can somehow resolve it by analyzing it, by trying to come to terms with it, using the wrong method, though. It is the fictitious entity within them –their “I”– the one that first created the problem and decided to resolve it by bifurcating into two equally fictitious entities –the “observer” and the “observed”– the former having assumed the role of exterminating the latter. A futile bluff, in any case.

Here lies the only one, the insuperable, the incurable common wound of humanity. Man defined as a prey to his own mental function. Thought and its products as the ultimate chimera, the absolute hallucination of mankind. Humanity trapped into an ideational nightmare, unconsciously created by her; man, defined as Dialectic’s eternal slave: perpetually caught into the ebb and flow of the fictitious dipoles his own mind creates; and the universe, standing aloof out there, completely indifferent –and, most probably, unaware– of man’s strife and sorrow, his “problems” and their “solutions”. In Buñuel’s The Exterminating Angel, we are not in front of a filmic psychological manifesto; we are rather speechless witnesses of the deep wound humanity has always borne; we are in front of its most concise definition ever, after any of its trivial details have been diligently removed; dissected to its very core.

**By Way of Epilog: a Total Inability to Believe**

Hermeneutically hermetic as it were, The Exterminating Angel could better be defined as just another typical Buñuelesque “daydream”. Bourgeoisie’s daydream is one of pleasentries, Lucullan meals, sonatas and good wine. Church’s daydream is of the contrary sign, but much of the same essence: unquestionable faith, relentless self-discipline, and so-called “morality” are their own ideational fetishes. Their common denominator is that both of them keep their disciples entrapped into their ideational cages; it is the disciples themselves the ones who have imagined the cage, and the ones who have deliberately opted for getting into it; they have constructed it, they have given it a name, and they have ceded themselves to it in
exchange for some abstract present or future privileges, among which the sense of “belonging” –the need for security\textsuperscript{20}– prevails. Both the Bourgeoisie and the Church are in reality inexistent for the universe. They only exist in the consciousness of the individuals who have created and joined them. But it is exactly this consciousness which is nothing more than a dream: it is “…the sublime consistency and interrelatedness of all knowledge”, in other words, the whole content of man’s consciousness, which “…may be and will be the highest means to sustain the universality of dreaming, the mutual comprehension of all dreamers, and thereby also the duration of the dream” (Nietzsche Gay Science 64).

And, society, being the super total of both the Bourgeoisie and the Church –actually, of all the Churches and similar social formations– is nothing more than the ultimate ideational trap of humankind. There is an all-embracing, a “human all too human” entrapment hypostasized by the millions of ideational cages, which our human minds go on creating incessantly.

With The Exterminating Angel Buñuel makes an all-inclusive metaphor for humanity’s condition; it is one of ineluctable slavery and entrapment. No trap exists in reality, Buñuel seems to be saying to us, after all. Finally, both the bourgeois fellow diners and the believers congregated in the church manage to rush out, despite their inexplicable difficulty in doing so from the start. What has happened? Actually, nothing. No apparent action has been taken by anyone, except for Leticia’s Freudian delirium, which additionally manages to convince nobody –neither us nor the director himself. Everything has been there from the beginning, given a priori, neutral, completely indifferent to the characters’ talks and fears,\textsuperscript{21} and yet, the bourgeois fellow diners, the believers, the whole of humanity have all been entrapped, unquestionably; into the labyrinthine net of their minds.

All of them could have avoided their traps if they had never intentionally accepted them; if they had never placed their class or religion as the ultimate “limit of their world”; or, in the last analysis, even if they could not have avoided getting trapped, they could at least have found their way out in a much shorter while, in a far easier way. They could have just seen the absurdity of all this and just stepped out of the room –or the church– by just enunciating two
words, instead of the hundreds or thousands needed in a typical psychoanalytic session: “No, thanks”.

In the closing shots of the movie, however, Don Luis will still cling to another kind of human entrapment, as an ultimate resort: politics. In his interview to Pérez Turrent and la Colina, he explains that the theme of these last shots is simply one that has been recurring again and again in his memory, unintentionally, during his whole lifetime (131): police repression –not social revolution. Nevertheless, we cannot resist the temptation of supposing that it is again the principal and perhaps the oldest of his obsessions –politics, revolution–, which is resurgent in these last shots, even though Buñuel does not know or want to admit it. The linear succession of the other typically Buñuelesque topics dealt with so far –Bourgeoisie and Church– is a first, unequivocal argument, that politics should be the third topic to be dealt with at this height of his film; another, even more apparent argument, is that, in this third case, the entrapment element does not appear at all. Both the police and the rebelled crowds burst into the streets giving rise to the intoxicating chaos of social unrest, without any obvious impediment that would restrain them. Revolution, at first sight, comes in sharp contrast to the claustrophobic state of things characterizing both the Bourgeoisie and the Church, reminding us of the leftist political predilections of Buñuel’s youth. Anarchy and revolution seem to be consecrated by Buñuel –even though subconsciously– as the only possible liberating factors, the only hopes for an entrapped humanity.

We would surely have endorsed such an interpretation, however simplistic it might seem within the context of a film so rich in meanings as The Exterminating Angel if Buñuel himself hadn’t ruled it out in the most unequivocal manner, in his memoirs: “Finally, I don’t like politics. The past forty years have destroyed any illusions I might have had about its efficacy” (My Last Breath 231).

In another instance, Buñuel explains that what is actually going on in the film is a never-ending loop, i.e., that in fact there is no end to the entrapment of his characters (Pérez Turrent and la Colina 132); if they have managed to get out of the Nobile’s house, they are immediately trapped again into a church; and, if for a moment they seem to have finally managed to get free into a kind of anarchic or revolutionary drunkenness, with no visible impediment for their
freedom, they are nevertheless condemned to relapse back to their former state of prisoners again, according to this explanation of Buñuel’s. So, according to this repetitive pattern as confirmed by Buñuel himself, Politics cannot free mankind either; if for a moment revolution seems to be the ultimate liberating force for humanity, it is condemned to fail sooner or later as well.

It is because Politics also pertains to the same reign of ideational imprisonment created by our human mind, and even though a film must finally end at some point or other, Buñuel was well aware that, if possible, this one should never have ended. The succession of human ideational traps virtually approaches infinity, and so should the succession of scenes of the movie. There is no salvation for humanity through any kind of self-imposed Absolutes or auto-suggestive maxims and credos, hence the element of infiniteness, inherent in the very conception of The Exterminating Angel.

After having watched Buñuel’s The Exterminating Angel, one should have come to a point of complete and all-encompassing disillusion. One should be able to see the absurdity and ridiculousness of our innumerable human problems; as well as their common root: human mind.

As such, The Exterminating Angel constitutes a powerful (non)analytic weapon in our hands; a relentless cultural bulldozer, capable of demolishing the very cements on which the whole of our modern Western culture has been erected, audaciously ignoring its conspicuous failure; a failure divided up to a million other minor ones; all of them sharing the same ill-fated ideational element. In this sense, The Exterminating Angel can also be conceived of as a kind of cryptic decryptor of the most fundamental and yet inaccessible mysteries of our brain function; a mystic demystifier of our innermost beliefs and projections; a well-disguised stripper of any hope or attachment one might still possess, after the devastating experience of the twentieth century; the most profane, ironic, and nihilistic belief terminator ever conceived of in the reign of cinema. Buñuel’s The Exterminating Angel certainly should be contemplated as a great –the greatest, perhaps– filmic liberator ever made.

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Notes

1 Plot’s summary of The Exterminating Angel: As preparations are being made for a formal dinner at Señor Edmundo Nobile’s luxurious mansion, the servants are leaving the house, one by one, for some unexplained reason. Once the dinner is finished all of the fellow diners gather in the music room and one of them, Blanca, plays a piano sonata. Then, people start to retire, but to their surprise, no one can actually get out of the room. Time passes by, and they start facing adversities such as lack of water and food. Simultaneously, aggressiveness appears amongst them. When things are already at their nadir, Leticia quite unexpectedly offers the solution to their plight, by urging people to reproduce the moment when Blanca was about to play the sonata. Indeed, after successfully recalling their exact position in the room and what everyone said or did at the controversial moment, suddenly, everybody is free to rush out of the room. However, the same ‘trap-in’ plague infects a mass of people gathered in a cathedral. In the next scene, a riot in the street is taking place and the police intervene to violently suppress it. Finally, a flock of sheep enters the cathedral, amidst sounds of gunshots out in the street.

2 “The interpretations we give to their evidence [of our senses] is what first introduces falsehood into it” writes Nietzsche in Twilight of the Idols (18).

3 Translation from Spanish is ours.

4 “Telling things is a relief” (Freud and Breuer “Studies on Hysteria” 189); and, at another point: “... each individual hysterical symptom immediately and permanently disappeared when we had succeeded in bringing clearly to light the memory of the event by which it was provoked and in arousing its accompanying affect, and when the patient had described that event in the greatest possible detail and had put the affect into words”(Freud and Breuer “Studies on Hysteria” 227).

5 Wolfgang von Goethe in his Theory of Colours expressed a similar idea when he warned us that, in science, as well as in any other kind of human knowledge, what we are doing in fact is that we “seek to explain what is in reality the cause by an effect made to usurp its place”, when we treat “a secondary [natural] phenomenon as a primordial one” (Kindle edition).

6 According to Nietzsche, man has always found in things “only that which he had laid in them” (Twilight of the Idols 31).

7 The exact relationship between word, concept and representation, as well as the lack of correspondence of the latter to reality has been given in an all-inclusive manner by Nietzsche: “Every word is automatically converted into concept, exactly to the extent that it does not serve the singular
and completely individualized experience to which it owes its origin. Every concept is formed by means of a comparison of unequal cases. Inasmuch as no single leaf is exactly the same as any other, the concept ‘leaf’ has been formed by arbitrarily abandoning those individual differences, by forgetting the distinctive tones, by means of which representation is born” (Nietzsche Sobre Verdad 27).

8 Hence, the term “bundle theory”, which has been attributed to Hume’s mind and personal identity theory. For more on this topic, consult, among others: Garrett 1981; Dicker 2001; and Froese 2009.

9 In another instance, Nietzsche gives a very instructive metaphor for this futile process: “If I give the definition of ‘mammal’ and, subsequently, once I have examined a camel, I declare: ‘here I have a mammal,’ there is no doubt that I have brought to light a new truth, but one of a limited value; I mean, it is anthropomorphic from beginning to end, and it does not contain even a single point in it which is ‘true in itself’, real and universal, except for man” (Nietzsche Sobre Verdad 27).

10 La Totalidad de la Vida [The Totality of Life] (185-197); On Fear (11, 64, 90, 107); and The Impossible Question (157).

11 In Stauffacher (1947), it is mentioned that “Buñuel himself led film critics and theorists to psychoanalysis, suggesting that it alone could provide the method to investigate the symbols of the film” (cited in Cooper 2013).

12 Buñuel himself has manifestly taken distances from psychoanalysis in more than one instances as, for example, again in his memoirs: “... and I don't enjoy rummaging around in the cliches of psychoanalysis. Amusingly enough, a great many psychiatrists and analysts have had a great deal to say about my movies. I’m grateful for their interest, but I never read their articles, because when all is said and done, psychoanalysis, as a therapy, is strictly an upper-class privilege” (My Last Breath 175; and also cited in Brown 66).

13 Geoffrey Kantaris correctly stresses Buñuel’s parodic intentions in his Ensayo de un crimen. He prefers to read Archibaldo’s weird story as “a mischievous framing, parodic of ‘the worst tradition of Hollywood Freudian surrealism,’ ... or at least as a wink to the Freudianism of the psychological drama/horror genre established by Alfred Hitchcock in the 1940s ...”, rather than discern “an explanatory psychological framework” in certain “structures” found in the film (314).

14 Freud mentions that Charcot had found a strikingly greater incidence of hysteria among males, especially males of the working class (Freud “Charcot” 282; “The Aetiology of Hysteria” 424).

15 The same question has posed Buñuel himself (Tomás Pérez Turrent and José de la Colina 125), and this seems to be the philosophical cornerstone of the movie.
One of the two most famous Tao master’s, alongside Lao Tzi.

This is how one of the more emblematic figures of the Zen Buddhist tradition, Rinzai, was known. For more detail, consult Rajneesh. Rinzai. Master of the Irrational.

Buñuel himself has acknowledged the susceptibility of the movie to various interpretations: “Pero que El ángel exterminador es susceptible de ser interpretado, qué duda cabe. Todos tienen derecho a interpretarlo como quieran” (Aranda 1969, mencionado en Orozco 2013).

The notion of “day dream” is borrowed from Freud (“Five Lectures...” 2202). In many instances, Buñuel admitted his obsessive predilection for dreams and recognized that his life and oeuvre had been largely determined by his own ones (My Last Breath 174). In Buñuel’s An Unspeakable Betrayal, we read: “The mechanism that produces cinematic images is, among all forms of human expression, that which most closely resembles the mechanism of the human mind in the way it works, or better yet, that which best imitates the workings of the mind during sleep. A film is like an involuntary imitation of a dream” (138-139).

In Sobre verdad y mentira en sentido extramoral, Nietzsche relates the proclivity of man towards the “creation of metaphors” –i.e., of concepts– with his deep-rooted need for security, by stating that, this way, “a new world is constructed, regular and rigid, which serves him of a fortress” (34).

‘... la naturaleza no conoce formas ni conceptos’, writes Nietzsche (Sobre verdad 28).