

Interview with Juan Luis Buñuel

Rob Stone

"I had a long talk with my cousin, Dr. Pedro Cristián García Buñuel, who lives in Zaragoza ..." The letter had come in response to a vague attempt to secure permission to reproduce a still from *Un chien andalou* (An Andalusian Dog, 1929). Turning the page revealed the signature: Juan Luis Buñuel. The missive continued:

We've been discussing all the events of the past year – awards, symposiums, festivals, etc. ad infinitum on my father. We discussed what he would have thought of all this ... (he wouldn't have liked it). It's like one big recuperation of his work by the official elements of society. As he once told me, "Now that I'm famous, they're naming streets after me ... a few years ago ... they would have had me shot!"

So this is the conclusion we've come to: we would like the words ME CAGO EN DIOS (I shit on God) to come out, one way or another in the book.

For example: "Luis Buñuel was a very discreet man. He never said 'me cago en Dios' in front of nuns or children."

Or: On the shoot of *La Voie lactée*, one early morning, he was heard exclaiming, as he bumped his head getting out of a car, "me cago en Dios!" He said it to himself ... a quite common Aragonese expression.

It could appear in a small footnote, at the end of the book, or better yet, on the front cover. Up to you. Maybe it'll shock the Protestant ethic or politically correct readers. Too bad.

Duly cited, correspondence ensued, resulting in a previously unpublished interview at the home of Juan Luis Buñuel (b.1934) in Paris in 2001.

What is your first memory of your father?

My first memory of life and him is when I was barely three years old and I was sitting on his knee by an open window and he was shooting an air pistol at the leaves on a tree. He was teaching me to shoot. That is my first memory.

You moved home a lot when you were a child, didn't you?

Yes, and then when we lived in California we'd always go out to the desert and be looking under rocks for insects and spiders. But kids don't like to move. You lose all your friends and have to make new ones. Each time, New York, Los Angeles, Mexico; each time I lost all my friends.

Where was your father happiest?

He liked New York. But he was happiest in Madrid because in Madrid he could go visit his family in Zaragoza. He liked Paris too; Los Angeles less. At the end he wanted to move to Lausanne, where nothing happens. My mother didn't want that. But my mother had lost all her family by this time and had all her friends in Mexico.

What was family life like?

He was always strict but always *cariñoso* (affectionate). But always very worried about his kids. That's what made life difficult sometimes, his fear that something would happen to us.

Were his parents strict with him?

They had servants. He always said his mother didn't know where the children's rooms were.



Figure 1.1 Family portrait: (left to right) Rafael, Jeanne, Juan Luis and Luis Buñuel. Courtesy of the Filmoteca Española.

What were his parents like?

His father was a humorous man, constantly joking. His mother was from Calanda and her father was a *boticario* (chemist). She was completely Semitic Arabic and his father was like a Swede with big grey eyes and almost blond.

What do you remember about growing up in Mexico?

My memories of Mexico and New York are of when all his friends would come over and at suppertime we would eat and then at ten, eleven, twelve o'clock we would sit around and talk. [Imitating his father] "*Por el frente de Teruel ...*" (On the Teruel frontline ...). Discussions, always. Always. Whatever country we were in, they'd get together these guys and have these discussions. It was quite a shock for them, being in exile, they needed to try and understand it.

What did exile mean for your father?

We were in Mexico. He didn't like Mexico, but where else could he go?

In your mother's book she writes about the house in Mexico becoming a Spain from Spain.

Yes, he built it with an architect from the Residencia [University in Madrid]. It's not a nice house. There are only two bathrooms and my father's bathroom is so narrow that if you want to wash your face you have to stand sideways. But in



Figure 1.2 The house on Felix Cuevas, Mexico City. Courtesy of the Filmoteca Española.



Figure 1.3 The living room of the house on Felix Cuevas. Courtesy of the Filmoteca Española.

Mexico, if you have a little bit of money, first you have all the servants you want, and we always had very nice ladies to help my mother. So life was fine, but he would make very little money. For *Los olvidados* he was paid one thousand or two thousand dollars and nothing else. He had to make one or two films a year to just survive. He'd make two films a year that barely covered costs and then he had a little more money so he built the house on Felix Cuevas [street], which is just brick, nothing fancy, but it was always full of friends. When I went to college, he had enough to pay for my college fees and that was it.

You went to a religious school, didn't you?

Yes, I went to a religious school in Los Angeles. The American school system was so bad they said, "Well, let's try a Catholic school." My whole class did their first communion and so I went along with my class and the priest said, "Well, tomorrow you're going to get the body of Christ and before you come to church tomorrow get your fathers to give you a blessing." So I tripped up to my father in my white suit for his blessing and he picked me up and said, "If you tell my friends about this, I'll kill you." I didn't understand, but okay, I said I wouldn't tell anyone.

It must have been difficult for him to send you to a Catholic school.

Well, he appreciated the discipline of the Jesuits. He said, "They taught me discipline and all that but don't believe a word of the religious part." Sometimes he'd be at the house and I'd come in and, you know at the end of *Tristana*, where

he's sitting round with priests and having chocolate? I'd come in and see my father sitting there with four priests and he'd be telling them, "*Christo era un majadero*" (Christ was a fool). And he'd just play with them.

Were you conscious of being in exile?

I remember when I graduated high school in Mexico and I wanted to go study in America and the American Council called me in and they had this big FBI file on my father. "In 1926 your father went to a meeting of the Left wing ..." "But I wasn't born yet!" "In 1933 ..." "I wasn't born in 1933!" "In 1936 ..." "I was two years old!" On and on. And some years later someone sent me the FBI file and most of it was deleted.

This file would have been produced in collaboration with Spanish authorities?

Probably. And here too in France. Because he had problems everywhere. He had problems here when *L'Âge d'or* came out. And Salvador Dalí was also a son of a bitch.

Your father never forgave Dalí, did he?

No, he didn't. No one who says it's good that Federico García Lorca got killed and that Franco won the war was going to keep his friends. Dalí had written many times to my father saying, "I have a great idea for a new film." But no, they never met again.

Your father didn't get on with Gala.

No, he told me once he tried to kill her. He jumped on her, was choking her and he told me that what he wanted was to see her tongue appear between her teeth.

Did he talk to you much about his time as a student in Madrid?

Yes. You know, they always look so serious in photographs, but they were fuck-offs, always laughing, always playing jokes on each other. People take him too seriously. I think he enjoyed laughing more than anything.

Did he ever talk to you about Lorca?

Yes, sometimes I'd see him sad and ask what's the matter? And he said, "I was thinking of Lorca, his finesse, and thinking of when they were making him walk, him knowing that they were going to shoot him, it makes me so sad." But my father was strange. He'd say, "I never knew Lorca was homosexual." And once he was furious: "Federico, come here, they tell me you're a fag!" And then he said, "My god, it's true." He didn't know. But that didn't change his feelings towards him. Thanks to Federico his whole world opened up. My father was *un bruto* (a brute) from Aragón who liked to box. And Lorca opened up the world of poetry and music to him. But he didn't like Lorca's poetry very much. He always said the greatness of Lorca was himself, his personality, his *cariño* (affectionate nature), which was extraordinary.



Figure 1.4 Toledo. Courtesy of the Filmoteca Española.

Did he tell you many stories of his student days?

This one time we were in Toledo walking around and having drinks and it got late and we got way up to the top of Toledo and there was this balcony with the Tajo [river] way down below and he got sad and I said, “What’s the matter?” And he said, “We used to come up here, Federico, Salvador and I ... to vomit after we’d drunk too much. Just to see the vomit hit the Tajo. He said they’d drink a lot of cheap anise and then go to Mass and then confession stinking of anise and say, “Father, I want to join the order!” “Well,” said the priest, “come back in a few hours.”

Was he a good student?

Yes, he read constantly, constantly. He would read and reread. But the Belgian writer who writes detective stories, Georges Simenon, was his favorite. We had the whole collection of Simenon.

Wasn’t he also a champion boxer?

No. He boxed but I think they hit him on the nose and he quit.

What else did he like?

He knew a lot about art but he didn’t like paintings very much. He hated museums. I remember once we were in Madrid and bored and I said, “Let’s go to the



Figure 1.5 Luis Buñuel in his boxing days. Courtesy of the Filmoteca Española.

Prado [Museum].” “Bad idea,” he said, “thirty years and I’ve never been to the Prado.” But we went and we rushed to see *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymous Bosch. “*Magnífico!*” he cried, “*Vámonos!*” (Magnificent! Let’s go!). We went to a bar and that was that. He told me once he went to the Picasso museum here in Paris and he starts walking through it and then starts running and by the end he’s running so fast he bursts through the door screaming and the museum people run after him and say, “What’s the matter?” And he says “Ah, I’m bored shitless!” Really, the only paintings we had in the house [in Mexico] were because I insisted because the walls were so bleak. He didn’t like paintings because spiders could hide behind paintings.

He didn’t like spiders?

Oh, no. That’s a family obsession. I have a cousin who sees a spider, he faints. Big guy.

And your father was the same?

Yes. The first time I went to Zaragoza, I was twenty-three and it was Christmas time and we had that night of Christmas dinner with the whole family and my cousin said, “Watch and see what happens at midnight, when you have cognac and sit around, just watch what happens.” Two uncles, three aunts, all sitting around and one of my aunts says, “Guess what I saw yesterday?” “Yes, what was it?”



Figure 1.6 Buñuel with his sisters. Courtesy of the Filmoteca Española.

“A spider the size of a potato!” And then they’d all be talking about spiders for three hours. My cousin said, “Every Christmas time this happens. It’s tradition.”

But your father studied entomology, didn’t he?

Yes, and he loved spiders. He was fascinated by them. Once in Mexico, I put a spider on the wall of the breakfast room. He’d get up at six, come down and have his coffee and I put this tiny little spider on the wall and at six-thirty: “*Qué nadie se mueva!*” (Nobody move!) Bang, crash, bang! Then he laughed. He saw it was a rubber one.

But in The Young One he has the scene where the girl stamps on a tarantula. He must have hated filming that.

Oh, he hated to kill any animal. Although, to be fair, he killed a lot of animals in his films. The first was in *Las Hurdes*, where he shoots the goat and people said, “Why did you shoot the goat?” Now goats fall and get killed. You can be with your camera waiting, but it can be ten or fifteen years. So you shoot a goat. Every day they kill goats for the market, so instead of cutting its throat you put a bullet through him. The wind was blowing this way so it blew the smoke across the camera. But anyway, they bought a goat set it up there and shot it.

They bought it? It wasn't a wild one?

No, wild goats don't let you get that close with the camera. He was honest. He just recreated the scene.

Do you think he would have liked to have fought in the Spanish Civil War?

No, I don't think so. I don't think he was physical in that sense. No, I don't think he would have been a soldier. That wasn't his strength. His strength was in other things. He got very nervous in May '68.

You were both here in Paris, yes? He writes in My Last Sigh that he was worried about you. He says [director] Louis Malle gave you a gun and taught you to shoot it.

Oh, I had guns. I still have guns. My whole family were gun-crazy. So we had seventy pistols. All my family had guns. My uncles, my cousins were all gun crazy. Maybe it comes from his father, who always had guns. And in '68 he knew that I had a .22 calibre pistol and he said, "The French army is coming in from the south, put up a barricade there and with your gun ..." I said, "What, me against the French army tanks with a .22 calibre pistol? Where will you be?"

And where was he?

He was setting up a film, so he was in a hotel near here and he was very worried because he said it reminded him of things that happened in Spain with the anarchists and things. Then he went off with [producer Serge] Silberman. I think he went off to London or something. He didn't like the students with their Mao books chanting, "Mao! Mao! Mao!" He hated that.

Would he have preferred anarchy?

Yes, it was too conformist.

And he was concerned about terrorism?

Yes, completely. His last film ends with a terrorist explosion because that's where we were headed. We were heading into a period of terrorism. His last script was about terrorists who were going to set up an atom bomb and were going to blow up the Louvre.

Because he didn't like museums.

Exactly. And at the end, the atom bomb is hidden and the terrorist says, "You don't need us, you know, the developed world is going to blow itself up just fine without our help."

So what would he have thought of 9/11?

He would have been ... it would have been a high moment of his life. He would have been terrorized by it, terrified by it, but he would have understood the reasons and everything behind it.

Where was he when Franco died?

He was in Mexico and he would have liked to have gone back to live in Spain then but my mother didn't. But he'd rest in Mexico and then go spend two or three months in Spain.

He must have been happy with the changes he saw there.

Yes, but he always said, "*Con los socialistas, cuidado!* (Careful with the Socialists!). They're treacherous." And they blew it. Look at what they had in Spain and they blew it. But the Republicans in Mexico all had their fingers worn down to a stub from hitting the table, shouting, "*Este año muere Franco!*" (This is the year that Franco dies!). They did that for forty years. My father used to get his communist friends angry by telling them that Franco had saved Spain. He'd say, "Suppose the Republic would have won. Hitler would have invaded France and would have invaded Spain too. The Americans would have come and bombarded Spain. Franco saved Spain."

Was he aware of his importance to Spanish filmmakers?

Yes, and he liked them all and treated them all well, especially [Carlos] Saura and [Juan Antonio] Bardem, the young guys. He'd smuggle copies of *Time* magazine into Spain for them. And he'd take them out and tell them stories and laugh. He'd take them to the Casa Botín in Madrid and if you go there, you go downstairs, and right to the left there's a little room that has two tables and that's where he'd sit because there was no echo. That was a problem for him, the echoes, because he



Figure 1.7 Buñuel with Carlos Saura. Courtesy of the Filmoteca Española.



Figure 1.8 Buñuel playing the part of the executioner in Saura's *Llanto por un bandido* (1964) practices using the garrotte on his director. Courtesy of the Filmoteca Española.

was hard of hearing and they'd have to speak one at a time. He couldn't have two people speaking at the same time like everyone does in Spain. When everyone started talking at the same time he'd just turn off his hearing aid. His deafness was a problem probably from a pistol shot. Maybe his father fired a gun too close to his ear. And he'd never want to get operated on. He was scared of doctors.

When did you become aware of your father's reputation?

His bad reputation, because they wanted to kick us out of Mexico.

But nevertheless you began working with him?

I started working for him on a film he made with Gérard Phillippe and he needed an assistant who spoke French and Spanish and in France at that time there were no assistants who spoke Spanish so he took me on as his assistant. It was *La Fièvre monte à El Pao*. Bad film. Nobody wanted to do it, but they had this contract with a studio so they did it. It's a bad film.

Which of his films did he like and was most pleased with?

Él. He said in his first two films he'd said everything he had to say. He'd say the rest is just repetition on a theme and variations. So he liked his first two films. And *Él*. And *Robinson Crusoe* he liked, the man alone in the jungle. The ones he made in France, Silberman pushed him into doing those films. He didn't want to do them anymore.



Figure 1.9 Juan Luis Buñuel (top right) working with Luis Buñuel (on camera). Courtesy of the Filmoteca Española.

Did your father read much of what was written about him?

“*Qué barbaridad de tontos!*” (What a bunch of idiots!), he’d say. But if there was a good critic, a guy who analyzed a film well, he would say “*Qué interesante!*” (How interesting!) and in fact it would show him things, if it was done creatively. For me there are only three books that did it well. There’s his book, *My Last Sigh*, my mother’s book, and the Pérez Turrent and de la Colina book is good because they just sat around a table and talked and talked.

What comes through all those interviews is how amused your father was at all the interpretations of his films.

Yes. He’s all, “*No sé, no sé, quizás*” (I don’t know, I don’t know, maybe). I remember for *The Exterminating Angel*, it won a prize in Cannes and I was there so I did the press conference. And the press were, “And what does this mean?” “Well, it doesn’t mean anything. My father says it doesn’t mean anything.” And there was one British critic, who said, “But it means this and I don’t care what your father says!” And then the film was sold in the United States and the distributor said please write us a short piece saying what it means. And I remember my father sitting over the typewriter getting exasperated: “Bah, I don’t know what it means!”

Did he really not know what it means?

What it means was ... what he told me it means was: he hated crowds. He hated being in a room with a lot of people. The idea of being in a crowded room, he absolutely hated. And he saw the horror in this. You know the painting *The Raft of the Medusa* by Gericault? That was the idea he had. Only to make a film of that was expensive, so he said, "Alright, what's cheap? A room! Right, okay. Now they can't get out of the room. Why? It's not important; they just can't get out." Now, once you get over that, then what do they do, and the rest is beautiful. And horrific. And funny.

He didn't like being interviewed either, did he?

Well, that was all the "who and how and where and why" and it bored him. He did one interview in Toledo with a Frenchman, very intellectual, and he started saying *barbaridades* (terrible things) about the French. And this man told him, "Most French people, if you say Toledo they think it's a brand of motorcycle; but you, you love Toledo, don't you?" "Not at all," said my father, "I can't stand it. I hate it." And then they didn't know what to do. It depended on his mood. Sometimes he would have fun. But what are you going to talk about? Henry Miller writing is not interesting. What's interesting is what he wrote.

How did your father deal with his reputation?

People didn't recognize him. He wore these dark glasses. Once he went to St Germain and he had grown a beard for some reason, and he went into a store to buy a hat and he said the man was looking at him with a smile, and he bought the hat and the man said, "Thank you, Mr Hemingway." He was very happy with that.

Wasn't he interested in the critical response to his films?

Well, it worried him. If a film was too well acclaimed it worried him. "Did I do something wrong?" He wasn't very happy with, "Wow, he's a genius!" Silberman set it up so he would be up for the Oscar for best foreign language film for *Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*. The press came and my father said: "Well, I've paid out over forty thousand dollars to the members of the Oscar jury so they should be happy." Bam! – big scandal in the newspapers. And the film did win. And so the newspapers came back and my father said, "You see, the Americans are very honest. They accept the fact that I gave them this money." Bam! – big scandal again.

Did he ever go to Cannes?

Yes. But Cannes was different. He could see old friends. He loved sitting in a café and just liked being with old friends.

*He wasn't there for *Viridiana*, was he?*

No, he had this dizzy sickness so he had gone back to Mexico. But I was. The censor was going to block it, but I quickly got hold of the negatives. And [the bullfighter Miguel] Dominguín had this friend, another bullfighter called Pedrete, who



Figure 1.10 Buñuel (second left) in Cannes with Arturo Ripstein (right), Sofía Infante and Gustavo Alatríste (left). Courtesy of the Filmoteca Española.

was going to France, so I flew to Barcelona with the negatives and put them in the back of this van, put all the capes and swords and everything on top of the cans and then we drove out through the frontier and the Guardia Civil just said, “*Suerte, torero!*” (Good luck, bullfighter!) and we got to France and I took the negatives on the train to Paris and we made a copy and that was the copy that played in Cannes.

Where it won the prize.

Yes, where it won the prize. It couldn’t represent Spain officially but the organizer of the festival had invited it personally. And it wins the prize as an invited film. Not Mexican, not Spanish. And the organizer said, “We’ll give the prize to the minister of culture from Spain.” And I said, “No! Give it to Silvia Pinal, she’s here. Or me, I’m here. Give it to anybody but not to this minister.” And he said, “Oh, it’s too late, it will create uproar.” So the guy from the ministry went up, very happy, got sacked; but maybe it’s good that he did.

You were assistant director on Viridiana. What was the experience of shooting it in Spain like?

Good. He was with friends. He was with Fernando Rey and Silvia [Pinal]. And a lot of the beggars were guys he’d known in 1936. They were great comics, stand-up comics from the music hall.

Were you controlled at all during the shoot?

No, we had complete freedom. He would get up at five in the morning and work out the day's schedule. He'd learnt to shoot that way from working in Mexico. Very exact. He'd cut the film together and get an hour and thirty-five minutes. Then he'd cut out the clapperboards and it would be an hour and half. Finished! He'd base the film on his ass. I mean, if his ass started hurting the film was too long.

And there's very little added, nothing extra, very little music.

No, he didn't like music. He felt it was cheating. Unless it's in the shot, you know, someone puts a record on, which happens in *Viridiana*.

But wasn't this a difficult time, because he was accused by friends in Mexico of betraying them?

Yes, but he just wanted to go back to Spain *con toda la mala leche que podía* (with all the anger and spite he could muster).

And ten years later he comes back to Spain to make Tristana.

Yes. Franco's minister of culture at the time [Manuel] Fraga Iribarne invited him.

Even after the scandal over Viridiana?

It seems Franco saw *Viridiana* and thought it wasn't up to much.



Figure 1.11 Filming *Tristana* with Serge Silberman (left) and José Luis Barros (right). Courtesy of the Filmoteca Española.

Why did your father go back?

My father enjoyed going back. He could go to Zaragoza on weekends to visit his family, his mother was still alive. But he was furious working on *Tristana*. He had this Panavision camera and he took it to Toledo where the streets are so narrow he couldn't use it. But I think he liked *Tristana*. It was based on his sister. They used to play this game when they were kids. She'd take two beans and tell him to choose one. "But they're both the same." "Choose one!" "This one." "Why did you choose it?" And so on. The whole theme of *Tristana* was that.

Chance?

Yes, chance and *mala leche* (mischievous spite).

Could you describe his working practice?

Well, the idea for a film was usually his but he would work with [Jean Claude] Carrière or whoever the script writer was at the time and it was the writer who would write everything and then the next day he would correct it.

So did he speak his thoughts and the writer would take notes?

Yes, but what he needed more than anything else was a wall to bounce the ball against. And it was important to have a good wall, someone who could criticize, tell him, "Oh, that's not good." "Why not?" "Well, because ..." They went to a hot spa a couple of hours from Mexico City, you know, a big hotel with swimming pools in the desert. And they would go there out of tourist season and be the only ones there except for weekends and the way they would work was they'd have breakfast at seven, then each one would go in their room to work or work out, go swimming, take long walks and all that and then they'd meet for the *aperitif*. That was very important. And that's where they would come up with an idea or a story or a thought that had to do or not to do with the script. The important thing was to have something original every day to say. It could have nothing to do with what they were working on. But they'd talk about it, have lunch, *la siesta*, and then they'd get in one of their rooms and then they'd start working, acting out the scenes, writing them down.

So his style of working really didn't change much since the very first time of working with Dalí?

No. What he told me about Dalí was that if one of them didn't like the idea the other could dismiss it.

Was it the same with Carrière?

Oh yes, always. And in fact, when he started work with Carrière, Carrière was a young writer and sort of scared. He agreed all the time and my father had to go to Silberman and say, "You know, he agrees all the time." So Silberman had to take Carrière aside and say, "Disagree with him. Even if you agree, disagree with him so he has something to work off."

Did your father need a target when writing, something to aim his satire at?

Yes, he'd always attack something. There was a tremendous censor in Mexico at that period, for example, that was terrible. You couldn't show a Mexican with sandals, you know. I remember one script my father had and this group goes into a typical Mexican village made of adobe, which is a good material, and the censor said, "No, there are no Mexican villages made of adobe, it's *denigrante* (degrading)." He almost got kicked out of Mexico with *Los olvidados*.

Did your father enjoy making films?

No. I don't think so. What he enjoyed was when it was easy. When he was in the studio, he liked that. And when he had his friends around him, [Michel] Piccoli and Fernando Rey and others like that, and then they would be laughing constantly. And in France you start at noon, you work late, because a lot of his actors were in the theatre, so you work from noon to seven-thirty and then the actor goes to his theatre. So we'd have lunch always at eleven-thirty and start shooting at noon, and around five-thirty he'd say, "Alright, now we'll change and shoot it this way." And that meant change all the lights in the studio, which means half an hour and in that half an hour we'd all rush, well the chosen few, the two assistants, my father, Fernando Rey, we'd go to one of the rooms and there'd be wine and *salchicha* and *salchichón* and so on.



Figure 1.12 Juan Luis Buñuel, Fernando Rey and Luis Buñuel. Courtesy of the Filmoteca Española.

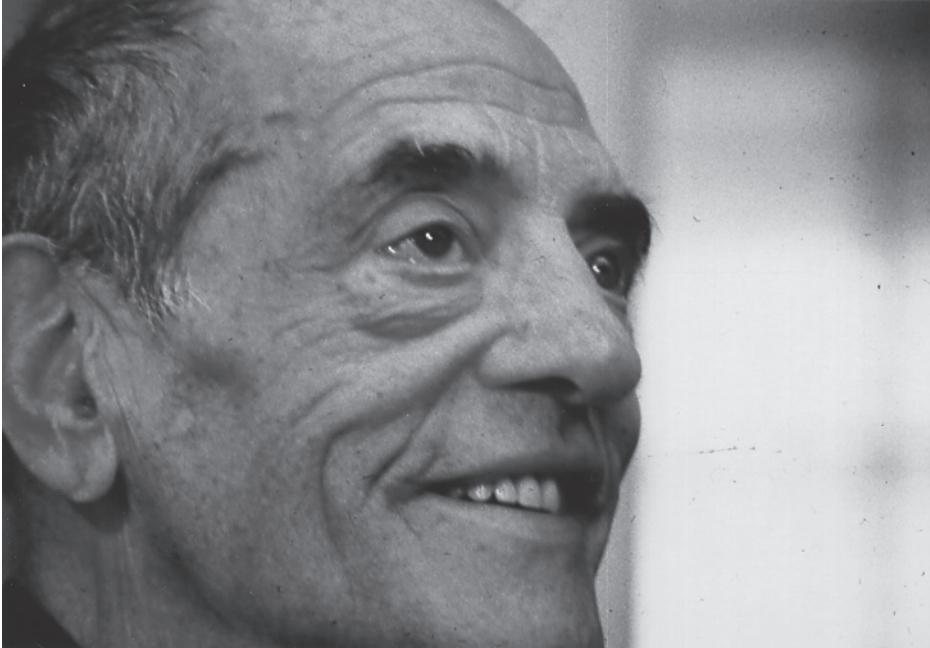


Figure 1.13 Luis Buñuel. Courtesy of the Filmoteca Española.

It sounds like a very civilized way of working.

Yes, it was. And I remember when we made *Diary of a Chambermaid*, I would pick him up to take him out to the shoot and it was winter and the car would get all dirty and when we got out there he was looking at my car and I left him, and we were setting up the day's shoot and someone said, "Where's the director?" And the director was washing my car. No pretension. He liked clean things. His car in Mexico he kept washed, his room was impeccable.

Was he interested in his films when they were finished?

Oh, he'd tell the producer, "Burn it."

What did you learn from working with your father?

We did one scene in *That Obscure Object of Desire* where it's Fernando Rey in this bar and they walk out of the bar and on the screen you just see these two guys walk out, but it took us like four hours. And on the screen it's nothing. Like Picasso, he would go like this and draw a beautiful woman. Ah, the years of things that all go into making that one moment!