Spiritual Visions of Time and Space in Luis Buñuel's Cinematic Medievalism

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Luis Buñuel and cinematic medievalism

In his 1982 autobiography, *Mon dernier soupir*, the filmmaker Luis Buñuel describes Calanda, his birthplace in Aragón, Spain: "Dans mon village, où je naquis le 22 février 1900, on peut dire que le Moyen Âge s'est prolongé jusqu'à la Première Guerre mondiale" (14). In addition, he speaks of discovering the cinema at the age of eight, this new medium representing "l'irruption d'un élément totalement nouveau dans notre univers du Moyen Âge" (40). Knowingly or not, Buñuel's notion of a local, long-lasting "medieval universe" echoed existing and subsequent scholarship characterizing Spain and Portugal as nations delayed in their transitions to modernity.

Most famously, Luis Weckmann's two-volume study, *La herencia medieval de México* (1983), and his ensuing works track "medieval survivals" in the early colonial Americas. His argument hinges on the notion that the Iberian Peninsula of the fourteenth to sixteenth century fell behind the rest of Europe and failed to transition beyond

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the Middle Ages: "Forced to remain long in the background of European evolution, due to her almost constant state of warfare, Spain realized, later than any other country in western Europe, the flowering of her mediaeval civilization. Thus, Spain was able to transmit to America, as a living product and not as a dead tradition, many of her mediaeval accomplishments" (1951: 130). From Weckmann's perspective, this "living product" comprised the legal, administrative, economic, literary, religious, and visual cultures of Spain.

As a concept, the transatlantic export of Iberian medievality applies in a somewhat literal sense to Buñuel's *Simón del desierto* (1965), the last of his Mexican productions. Taking inspiration from the life of a fifth-century Christian stylite, or pillar-saint, the film transforms the Mezquital Valley of Central Mexico into the Syrian desert. He similarly allows the past to irrupt into the present and geographies to intersect in his most "medieval" film, *La Voie Lactée* (1969). In the loosest terms, the narrative follows two French "pilgrims" (profit-seeking vagabonds) along the Camino de Santiago, or Way of St. James, a series of pilgrimage routes converging in Santiago de Compostela and dating back to an early Christian tomb discovered in the early ninth century and identified as that of the apostle James. In capturing 2000 years of history, Buñuel and his co-writer, Jean-Claude Carrière, drew on multiple sources, including the Bible, ecumenical councils, and medieval compilations of miracle accounts. In his autobiography, Buñuel reconceives the earlier *Simón del desierto* as an encounter that could have taken place in *La Voie Lactée*: "Aujourd'hui il me semble que *Simon du Désert* pourrait être déjà une des rencontres des deux pèlerins de *La Voie Lactée*, sur le chemin sinueux de Saint-Jacques-de-Compostelle" (1982: 296). The two films may have been narratively and chronologically distinct, but he nevertheless saw them in dialogue with each other.

Cinematic medievalism typically comprises films set in the Middle Ages (whether real, imagined, or entirely fantastical) or alluding to historical events, literatures, characters, or themes associated with the period. Such films are not limited by genre or by any specific

conventions, and even their settings vary dramatically owing to the slippery nature of the "Middle Ages" as a spatiotemporal concept. In the introduction to their edited volume on *Medieval Film*, Bettina Bildhauer and Anke Bernau discourage the judgement of medievalism "by its perceived failure to measure up in terms of content to academic standards of historical veracity" (2). In contrast to simple condemnations of medieval film as ahistorical, escapist, or conservative in its longing for a "lost" past, the authors invite us to consider the ways in which "medieval film can actually nuance our understanding of history and of film precisely through its strange temporalities" (5).

To some extent, Buñuel's view of the Middle Ages and related nostalgia for his youth in Calanda are tinged with sentimentalism. This is especially evident in a letter to his friend Ricardo Urgoiti, founder of the Filmófono production company. Writing from Hollywood in 1946, Buñuel laments, "Odio cada día más nuestra época tecnológica, la más inmoral y antiespiritual de la historia. Si hubiera un rincón olvidado en el mundo y pudiera comer en él, allí me iría. En Hollywood y en New York he comenzado a sentir hondamente la Edad Media" (Herrera Navarro 2005: 9; Buñuel 2019: 187). He reiterates these sentiments in his later autobiography, albeit this time acknowledging the polarities of the past: "J'ai eu la chance de passer mon enfance au Moyen Âge, cette époque 'douloureuse et exquise', comme l'écrivit Huysmans. Douloureuse dans sa vie matérielle. Exquise dans sa vie spirituelle. Juste le contraire d'aujourd'hui" (1982: 26).

Despite Buñuel's longing for an epoch "exquisite in its spiritual life", his unique expression of medievalism aligned less with retrospective or religious desire than with his broader interest in the "spiritual life" as a category of imagination, and especially one that could be trained and developed: "je crois que l'imagination est une faculté de l'esprit qui peut s'entraîner et se développer, comme la mémoire" (1982: 51-52). As early as *Un chien andalou* (1929), Buñuel and his collaborator Salvador Dalí experimented with using systematically discontinuous montage to dissolve the boundaries

between dream and reality (Elder 2013: 381-384). These erratic shifts in time and space capture the hallucinatory quality of dreams that certain Surrealists wished to bring into waking reality, but they similarly intersect with the medieval life of the mind that so preoccupied Buñuel. Paradoxically, the technological age he decried offered him the very tools with which he could recapture or induce the creative potential of the Middle Ages.

While scholars have examined Buñuel's references to early Christian and medieval literatures and aesthetics (Salvador Ventura 2007; Velasco 2013; Smith 2018) and their revivals in Gothic fiction (González de León 2007), I propose an alternative reading of Buñuel's medievalism. His engagements with contemplative and visionary states in *Simón del desierto* and *La Voie Lactée* produce unconventional forms of veracity, not in their academically rigorous communication of historical fact, but rather in their uses of visual and narrative strategies that are authentic to the Middle Ages in their own way. Buñuel's treatments of space and his "strange temporalities" resonate with medieval representations of pilgrimage, prophecy, and revelation, both divine and demonic.

Visionary space and time in the Middle Ages

By the time of Buñuel's youth in Calanda, little of the town's medieval architecture survived. A small church of the twelfth or thirteenth century was dismantled in the mid-eighteenth century for reuse of its stone in a larger baroque church (París Marqués 2018). The twelfth-century castle at the high point of the city faced a different fate, much of it destroyed during the Carlist Wars of the nineteenth century (Benavente Serrano 2010: 89). Much like Buñuel's own films, the "medieval" elements of the town were visible in dispersed fragments or were less material than ritual.

The short documentary *Calanda* (1966), by Buñuel's son Juan Luis, highlights the town's agricultural exports, a seventeenth-century miracle in which the Virgen del Pilar (or Our Lady of the Pillar) restores a man's amputated leg, and the famed drums of

Calanda. In this tradition, the townsfolk play their drums for 24 hours beginning at noon on Good Friday: "L'évangile dit que lorsque le Christ est mort les cieux furent envahis par les ténèbres, que les rochers se fracassèrent les uns contre les autres et que le tonnerre gronda dans les entrailles de la terre". While most participants beat their drums, certain men take on the uniforms and roles of Roman soldiers, centurions, and a general. A single figure, dressed in what Buñuel identifies as a suit of medieval armor, takes on the role of Longinus, who pierced Christ's side with a lance (1982: 28). In addition to costume-based roleplaying and reenactment, the Good Friday traditions involve the townsfolk climbing a nearby hillside as if ascending Calvary to the site of the crucifixion outside Jerusalem, or participating in Christ's funerary procession. While these traditions in Calanda date to the eighteenth century, the practice of visualizing religious ritual and procession through the lens of the Scriptures has an extensive history in the Iberian Peninsula.

Fig. 1. Byzantine brooch with the Adoration of the Magi, from a Visigothic grave at El Turuñuelo (Spain), end of the sixth century (Madrid, Museo Arqueológico Nacional, inv. 1963/56/1; photograph: Ángel M. Felicísimo, licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic CC BY 2.0).

Christian pilgrims had long visualized themselves as reenacting the actions of the Magi (Matt. 2), the archetypal biblical travellers offering gifts to the infant Christ (Vikan 1990). Early pilgrims to the column of Symeon the Stylite the Elder (ca. 389-459) at Qal'at Sem'an (Syria) collected souvenir clay tokens with images of both the saint on his column and the Magi (Boero 2021). A circular gold brooch from the grave of a high-status Visigothic woman at the archeological site of El Turuñuelo (near Medellín, Badajoz, Spain) features the Adoration of the Magi and a Greek inscription invoking protection from the Virgin Mary for a female wearer (Balmaseda Muncharaz 2009: 25-26; Figure 1). The deceased herself may have brought it westward with her, possibly returning from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Similarly, pilgrims seeking to venerate the tomb of St. James at Santiago de Compostela encountered the Magi on Adoration portals throughout their journey (Ruiz Cuevas 2009). Once they arrived at their destination and entered the cathedral, they came face to face with a stone choir, no longer extant, on which they witnessed a final Adoration of the Magi. The repeating motif encouraged viewers to collapse not only temporalities (biblical history and their actions in the present) but also one destination (Bethlehem) with another (Qal'at Sem'an or Santiago de Compostela).

The monastery of Santo Domingo de Silos lies roughly 60 km south of Burgos, the closest stop on one of the major pilgrimage routes to Compostela. Pilgrims making the arduous detour from the Camino did so to venerate at the tomb of the monastery's canonized abbot and patron saint (Lappin 2002). In her work on the *vita apostolica* (apostolic life) and the sculpture of monastic cloisters, Ilene H. Forsyth examines the selection of iconographies that emphasize the apostles and encourage monks and canons to achieve union with Christ by emulating his disciples. Through these acts of imitation, they "metaphorically experience the places, people and events of the apostolic age (e. g. thereby substituting the spiritual journey of their professional mission for actual travel to pilgrimage sites)" (1986: 75).

Fig. 2. Journey to Emmaus with Christ as pilgrim, monastery of Santo Domingo de Silos (Spain), cloister's northwest pier, ca. 1100 (photograph: Lawrence Lew, licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.0 Generic CC BY-NC-ND 2.0).

In the case of the Doubting Thomas in the Silos cloister, a scene of faith in the absence of material proof, the apostles receive special prominence despite having a secondary role in the narrative (Forsyth 1986: 77). In a sculpted Journey to Emmaus on the cloister's northwest pier, Christ engages two disciples while in the guise of a medieval pilgrim, recognizable through the addition of a pilgrim's wallet adorned with the characteristic cockle-shell badge of Santiago de Compostela (Valdez del Álamo 2007; Figure 2). The historical Christ sculpted around 1100 would have co-existed with medieval pilgrims who visited the monastery. Moreover, the monks' own circumambulation of the cloister represented an additional type of imitation, transforming the act of contemplative walking into their own spiritual pilgrimage route.

Medieval multi-temporality was not restricted to positive or aspirational imagery, nor was it limited to the intermingling of the biblical past with the medieval present. The highly public visual programs of Last Judgment portals allowed carvers to portray the saved and the damned in highly localized, contemporary terms (Lahoz 2020). In doing so, they projected the medieval present into the apocalyptic future. For example, the Puerta del Juicio, or Door of the (Last) Judgement, of Tudela Cathedral (Navarre, Spain) features warnings against the sin of avarice. Among the sinners on the thirteenth-century archivolts surrounding the now-lost tympanum are tailors and drapers, a baker, and a butcher, all merchants who could manipulate the measures or quality of their products to increase their profits illegitimately. Demons also torment and influence various individuals in contemporary dress, among them a knight, an abbot, monks, and a bishop (Figure 3). The inclusion of demonic figures in such imagery served the dual purpose of communicating literal torment at the end of time and metaphorical enticements in medieval people's day-to-day lives, especially in cases where demons appear as manipulative entities. In other words, such demons were legible as visible/material and invisible/immaterial simultaneously.

Theological texts attributed to the Church Fathers, and in particular Augustine of Hippo's *De genesi ad litteram* (*On the Literal Meaning of Genesis*), distinguish among vision types: corporeal vision (*visio corporalis*), sense knowledge attained through the eyes of the body; spiritual vision (*visio spiritalis*), perceptions in dreams and the imagination; and intellectual vision (*visio intellectualis*), true comprehension and the grasping of abstract concepts, in other words seeing things as they really are but in a sense that is beyond visual likenesses. Medieval carvers and illustrators adapting textual accounts of spiritual vision contended with indeterminacy, especially the unclear role of the body and whether an apparition is tangible or exists exclusively in the mind. In addition, accounts of spiritual vision regularly involve the conjunction of temporalities —visions of the past or future unfolding in the present— and of earthly, divine, and infernal settings.

Fig. 3. Bishop and monk with a demon, Puerta del Juicio, Tudela Cathedral (Spain), ca. 1230 (photograph: Santiago López-Pastor, licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivs 2.0 Generic CC BY-ND 2.0).

Art historian Sixten Ringbom proposes a *Bildgrammatik* (image grammar) that medieval artists employed to give visual form to speech or inner phenomena such as thought, imagination, and dream (1989). These techniques include the use of borders to distinguish between levels of reality, as well as the juxtaposition of protagonists and the content of mental activities within a single space. The latter necessarily creates ambiguity around what is and is not "palpably present" (1989: 36). This lack of clarity and certainty, which Ringbom frames as a problem to be overcome, Buñuel and many of the Surrealists embraced. In *Simón del desierto* and *La Voie Lactée*, Buñuel's approaches to visionary experience and other cognitive effects are completely in line with those of medieval artists: mental and physical space merge, either through the types of juxtaposition described by Ringbom or through strategic

manipulation of image and audio editing conventions; and spatiotemporal boundaries dissolve through costuming, reenactments of past events, or the superimposition of apocalyptic iconographies onto the here and now.

Simón del desierto (1965)

In an interview with Vicente Allanegui, a priest from Calanda, Buñuel calls *Simón del desierto* a documentary, and describes drawing from Jacobus de Voragine's thirteenth-century *Legenda aurea* (*Golden Legend*) and the twentieth-century scholarship of André-Jean Festugière and Hippolyte Delehaye (Aub 1985: 487-498). Discussing Delehaye's 1923 *Les saints stylites*, Buñuel notes, "Entonces leí la parte interesantísima donde están quince, veinte estilitas, con consideraciones sobre cómo eran, cómo hablaban, qué pasaba, por qué era eso. Era el momento del anacoreta en el Medio Oriente […] En Egipto, en Siria y en casi toda la parte esa del Mediterráneo oriental" (488-489). Buñuel expresses a desire for accuracy, describing the film as a process of transcription, one that could even lead to claims of plagiarism on the part of Festugière (489).

Despite Buñuel's explicit sources and his insistence on veracity, *Simón del desierto* exists in an ambiguous time and place. The film begins with Práxedes, a man grateful for miraculous healing, donating a new, taller column to Simón. A robed man then praises Simón for inspiring his brothers and for following in the footsteps of "our father, Symeon the Stylite". This phrasing opens the possibility of Symeon as a predecessor in living memory, setting the film in Late Antique or medieval Syria, or Symeon as a *spiritual* predecessor, allowing the narrative to unfold in any desert and any period after the fifth century.

Evocations of Buñuel's hometown of Calanda add to the unfixed qualities of the setting. Simón's restoration of a repentant thief's amputated hands recalls the so-called Calanda miracle, which involves a Marian instantiation named for her original appearance to Saint James atop a column (Buñuel 1982: 19). Thunderous, nondiegetic

drumming intrudes into the soundtrack at various intervals, supplementing the connection to the Virgen del Pilar through an additional evocation of Buñuel's hometown. The opening credits confirm the source of the drumming: "Saeta y tambores de Semana Santa de Calanda, (Aragón)". Buñuel used the Drums of Calanda in several productions, taking advantage of their "pulsations d'un rythme secret, qui nous transmet une sorte de frisson physique, hors de toute raison" (Buñuel 1982: 28).

A second category of temporal interpenetration occurs when the film's viewers are drawn into the characters' sensory experiences. For roughly fifteen seconds, a young woman passes by the column, bearing a jug on her shoulder and adjusting her covered yet visible hair with a long-nailed hand. As Simón subsequently scolds a monk for looking upon her, audiences in a darkened theater realize the film's control over their own gaze —their own inability to resist the seductive image and to follow Simon's precept, "No te dejes arder en el fuego de una contemplación vana".

As Buñuel himself noted in 1953,

> [b]ecause it acts in a direct manner upon the spectator in presenting to him concrete people and objects, because it isolates him by virtue of the silence and darkness from what might be called his 'psychic habitat', the cinema is capable of putting him into a state of ecstasy more effectively than any other mode of human expression. But more effectively than any other, it is capable of brutalising him. (Buñuel 2002: 45).

Like the sensory restrictions of monastic and ascetic ritual —for instance the prayer and meditation depicted in *Simón del desierto*— film has the capacity to direct and transform perception.

The power of isolation that Buñuel associated with some of the more austere practices of the Middle Ages, among them asceticism, appealed to him for not engendering religiosity but rather unencumbered creativity. He describes the similar benefits of isolation for the Marquis de Sade (who also appears as a character in *La Voie Lactée*): "En la cárcel, que junto a todos sus inconvenientes podía darle un delicioso aislamiento, Sade estaba en libertad de entregarse

a su imaginación" (Colina and Pérez Turrent 1986: 161). He goes on to describe his own desire to be alone with his soul "y soñar despierto, imaginar lo imaginable… y lo inimaginable. […] ¿Se imaginan ustedes lo que debe haber sido el silencio en la Edad Media?" (161).

Distraction from the life of the mind becomes its own major theme in *Simón del desierto*, taking the form of a feminine Satan's tortures and temptations. She appears to Simón in various guises —woman and man, young and old. From the bottom of the column, she reveals her gartered thighs and bares her breasts. Moments later, she stands beside him and strokes his beard. Libby Saxton describes the methods through which Buñuel brings these apparitions to life:

> In the midst of conversations with Simón that are filmed in classic shot/reverse-shots, the Devil changes not only her appearance but also her location: one moment, she is shouting temptations at him from the ground; the next, she is on top of the pillar whispering in his ear. Discontinuities in time and space are exacerbated by uncertainty over the extent to which the film depicts the ascetic's fantasy. Is the Devil a figment of Simón's imagination, a figure in his dreams? Or is she conjured up by the film, rather than by his psyche? (2013: 422-423).

Like the demons in Last Judgment painting and sculpture, benign influence inflicts real and metaphorical damage simultaneously, taking on seductive or repulsive forms as needed.

In a moment of prayer, Simón notes, "Señor, Señor, mis pensamientos se alejan de ti". The film pairs the metaphor of increasing distance from the divine with the image of Satan walking towards the column. She arrives in a short tunic with a lamb in her hands. Her feminine voice and face combined with her short beard produce a youthful ambiguity consistent with Late Antique iconographies of Christ as a youthful Good Shepherd, but these same ambiguities introduce the anxiety, so persistent during the Middle Ages, around seductive images and the worship of false gods.

The final sequences bring the film's spatiotemporal discontinuities to a climax. A monk tells Simón, "Las hordas del Anticristo

avanzan hacia Roma. Quizás no tarden mucho en llegar hasta aquí". Satan later declares, "vienen a buscarnos", following which an airplane passes overhead. This wonder of the technological age brings the fifth-century saint into the audience's present. Or, considered in reverse, the plane transports the hordes of the Antichrist, who encroach barbarically on the past.

In the concluding scene, a raucous hell set in a 1960s Mexican nightclub, Simón and Satan sit at a table, observing as young couples dance frenetically to instrumental rock. The sounds of twentieth-century urban life have now replaced the Drums of Calanda. Simón asks Satan what the dance is called: "Carne radioactiva. Es el ultimo baile, el baile final". According to Federico Arana of Los Sinners (the aptly but coincidentally named Mexican rock band), it took fifteen years for him and his fellow bandmates to see the film and realize, "evidentemente, Buñuel nos retrató como criaturas diabólicas" (2002: 172). Like a medieval portal in which the dress and activities of the damned mirror those of contemporary viewers, the "last dance" in the nightclub becomes a twentieth-century Judgment Day.

While Buñuel uses medieval conventions to make the realities of future damnation vivid and present, he also sets contemporary life against his impressions of the past: "Hay un instrumento infernal, que podría realmente haber inventado el diablo, o un enemigo de la humanidad: la guitarra eléctrica. Qué época diabólica la nuestra: la multitud, el smog, la promiscuidad, la radio, etcétera. Yo volvería encantado a la Edad Media, siempre que fuese antes de la Gran Peste del siglo xiv" (Colina and Pérez Turrent 1986: 161). Unsurprisingly, the same Buñuel who famously thanked God for being an atheist (Buñuel 1982: 211) expresses an equally ambivalent attitude towards technology: electric guitars and radios may be infernal, yet the cinema is "una máquina de fabricar milagros" (164). The machine that manufactures miracles is perfectly suited to producing supernatural manifestations and spatiotemporal disjuncture, ultimately troubling the distinctions between real and imaginary.

Bildhauer and Bernau's introductory essay on "the a-chronology of medieval film" highlights the treatment of time that distinguishes

cinematic medievalism from other categories of narrative filmmaking: "more so than films set in other periods of the past, the present or the future, medieval films […] offer alternatives to chronological conceptions of time. Both in their plots and in their filmic techniques they frequently show, for instance, anachronisms, time stoppages, time travel and cyclical time" (2009: 1). These effects, which shuttle both characters and viewers between times in *Simón del desierto*, reach new heights in *La Voie Lactée*. According to Buñuel's own assessment, "Eso lo perfeccioné en *La Vía Láctea*, donde los personajes no necesitan ya ningún avión para pasar de una época a otra" (Colina and Pérez Turrent 1986: 165).

La Voie Lactée (1969)

Speaking over footage of a map, the narrator of *La Voie Lactée* begins with a history of the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, recounting that a star led shepherds of the seventh century to the resting place of St. James. He explains the etymology of Compostela ("campus stellae", or field of the star) and the origins of "Milky Way" as an alternative name for "Way of St. James". As the narration ends, the film cuts abruptly to a full minute of opening credits set over loud footage of vehicular traffic —a jump as abrupt as the arrival of the airplane in *Simón del desierto*. Following the opening credits, two French travelers begin their journey from Fontainebleau to Compostela, attempting to hitchhike along the quieter dirt road that has replaced the earlier motorways.

The two men seek alms from a man walking in the opposite direction, who eventually tells them, "allez, prenez une prostituée", and instructs them to call the offspring of this union, "tu n'es pas mon peuple" and "plus de miséricorde", a speech adapted from God's instructions to the prophet Hosea (Hosea 1:2, 6, and 9). Once the man departs, the pilgrims see him holding hands with a person of short stature who, in turn, releases a dove —trinitarian imagery making the speaker's identity as God explicit. This is the first of many episodes in which the travelers, now quasi-prophets,

and the film's other protagonists witness miracles, some drawn from the Gospels and others, according to Buñuel, from the medieval writings of Iberian priest and poet Gonzalo de Berceo (ca. 1196-ca. 1264; Colina and Pérez Turrent 1986: 174).

Buñuel recounts his initial interest in Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo's *Historia de los heterodoxos españoles* (1880-1882), and specifically the equal intensity with which heretics and orthodox Christians committed to their truths (Buñuel 1982: 301; Colina and Pérez Turrent 1986: 192). He was especially drawn to heretics and their combination of dogmatism and bizarre inventiveness. Buñuel insists the film has nothing to do with taking sides, but rather with being freed from time and space to travel through fanaticism, a path applicable "à toute idéologie politique ou même artistique" (Buñuel 1982: 302-303). The characters' geographic displacement propels them along a nonlinear history of theological debates on transubstantiation, the origins of evil, the natures of Christ and the Trinity, free will, the Immaculate Conception, and others.

In an early interaction, the younger "pilgrim", named Jean Duval, comments on the beard of the older, Pierre Dupont. Jean notes that the beard inspires confidence, which suddenly initiates a flashback —or seeming flashback, as implied through the conventions of narrative cinema— in which a mother convinces her son not to shave. Costuming makes the mother and son immediately legible as the Virgin and Christ, an identification reinforced through the presence of Joseph as carpenter. Following this interposed scene, the men encounter a roadside child with stigmata and forehead wounds evoking the crown of thorns. The role of Christ is established as transferable, and Pierre's life thus becomes a form of *imitatio Christi* akin to a medieval monk in the Silos cloister. Similarly, the names of the two travelers —Jean and Pierre, or John and Peter— suggest a possible *vita apostolica*.

While all dialogue of the first eighteen minutes is in French, "un berger qui parle comme un curé" (according to the older pilgrim) introduces the first linguistic shift. He instructs Jean and Pierre to follow him but not to speak a word of what they see, although the

Frenchmen fail to understand his Latin and consequently stay in place. The proliferation of languages in the film —French, Italian, Spanish, and Latin— captures authentic pilgrimage experiences that brought travelers of diverse origins into contact with each other, as well as medieval life more generally, where the languages of liturgical practice and the Scriptures coexisted with a range of regional vernaculars.

The "shepherd who speaks like a priest" joins a group of robed individuals, and a different man tells the group, still in Latin, "good tidings from Rome, thanks to the proconsul Volventius. The emperor Gratian has restored Priscillian to the bishopric of Ávila". He then hands a bishop's crozier to Priscillian (ca. 340-ca. 385), a controversial figure in Roman Hispania (the Roman name for the Iberian Peninsula) who became bishop of Ávila in 380. Priscillian was a strict ascetic associated with a sect whose beliefs were considered gnostic in nature and therefore heretical. He was eventually tried on charges of sorcery and sentenced to death. The orgiastic scenes that follow represent the gnostic deprecation of the material world and corporeal existence, the seat of evil in gnostic thought.

Two secondary protagonists, a pair of Protestant students, François and Rodolphe, similarly move through time, in this case by shedding their robes and donning the discarded attire of twentieth-century hunters. Interviewing Buñuel, José de la Colina describes these clothing changes as a substitute time machine, and Tomás Pérez Turrent notes that time travel occurs "sin truco: a la vista del espectador y en el mismo paisaje" (Colina and Pérez Turrent 1986: 174). Camera tricks help Buñuel manufacture certain miracles, as in *Simón del desierto*, but at times characters' ability to shift through history is as non-technological as a man from Calanda who dresses in medieval armor and becomes Longinus, or a group of medieval pilgrims in Spain who embody the Magi.

In one sequence, the pilgrims eat while watching young schoolgirls recite canons from ecumenical councils, primarily from the Council of Trent (1547), but also one from the first and second Councils of Braga (561/572), which condemned Manicheanism

and Priscillianism (Ferreiro 2010). The scene cuts to the execution of a pope by a firing squad, and then back to a dialogue between Jean and a stranger sitting nearby, who has just heard the sounds of shooting.

> Man: Qu'est-ce que c'est? Il y a un champ de tir par ici?
> Jean: Oh non, non, c'est moi. Je m'imaginais qu'on fusillait un pape.

Jean's explanation that sounds in his imagination are audible to the stranger explicitly acknowledges that boundaries between thought and reality —and between shots in a film— are porous in a constructed cinematic universe. Potent thought re-merges later in the film: Jean wishes injury on a driver who refuses to stop for them, precipitating a fiery crash. Much like writers and directors, the protagonists have the power to will reality into existence.

As in *Simón del desierto*, *La Voie Lactée* draws audiences into multiple temporalities. As a priest prepares to recount a miracle, he gathers patrons in a tavern around him. He begins to speak, at which point he turns to look directly at the camera. In breaking the fourth wall, he transforms the viewers into additional tavern guests, joining their realities to the visionary times and spaces of the film. His narration centers on a Carmelite nun who flees her convent for the love of a man. When she returns, remorseful, after years away, nobody reacts with scorn or surprise. She eventually realizes that, in her absence, the Virgin has adopted her likeness. The capacity for holy to become mundane and mundane to become holy recurs throughout both the film and the art of the Middle Ages, as in the example of the Christ as pilgrim or pilgrims as Magi.

Sixten Ringbom's description of juxtaposition, namely individuals and their mental activities co-existing in the same physical space, might be extended to account for the additional possibilities that film editing affords. Through the juxtaposition of shots, Buñuel similarly implies continuities between levels of reality, times, and individuals —as with Pierre who is an elderly pilgrim in the present and a young Christ in an implied flashback, or with Jean's thoughts

becoming audible to a stranger. Shot juxtaposition similarly creates permeable boundaries between locations. A subsequent scene at the inn involves Rodolphe, a recent convert from Protestantism, in conversation with a virgin who has appeared in his room and a priest who mostly speaks to them from the other side of a locked door:

> Priest: Le Christ est né de sa mère sans rompre sa virginité. Comprenez-vous bien cela?
>
> Woman: Oui! Comme la pensée jaillit du cerveau sans briser la boîte crânienne.
>
> Rodolphe: Ou comme un rayon de soleil traverse une vitre sans la casser.

The priest alternates between being inside the room with the other two and outside in the hallway. This visual metaphor for Mary's body and Christ's incarnation also captures the dissolution of material thresholds that editing facilitates.

As Pierre and Jean finally reach the outskirts of Santiago de Compostela, a disappointed woman announces that pilgrims no longer come; the body once thought to be that of St. James turns out to be Priscillian's headless corpse. "Mais en tout cas maintenant vous n'êtes plus si pressés", she says to them, wrapping an arm around the older man and suggesting they all have some fun in the grass. She confirms they have money for her services and explains that she wants to have a child whom she will call "tu n'es pas mon peuple" or "plus de miséricorde", bringing the two men closer to fulfilling their callings as Hosea-like prophets but, narratively, denying them entry into Santiago de Compostela.

La Voie Lactée concludes in the first-century Holy Land, presented as if contiguous with the twentieth-century woods into which Pierre and Jean have disappeared. Following a final miracle and discourse from Christ, the following text appears: "Tout ce qui, dans ce film concerne la religion catholique et les hérésies qu'elle a suscitées, en particulier du point de vue dogmatique, est rigoureusement exact. Les textes et citations sont empruntés, soit aux écritures, soit à des ouvrages de théologie et d'histoire ecclésiastique, anciens et

modernes". Despite this air of documentary authority, the film nevertheless thwarts all certainty and linearity, even denying the protagonists the ability to reach their destination —a traditional component of a hero's journey. The only certainties for Buñuel are mystery and the ineffable, reinforced through the dissolution of temporal and material boundaries, although this dissolution is "rigorously exact" from the standpoint of medieval religious experience.

Conclusion

Buñuel perceived the Middle Ages not as spatiotemporally distant but as a period he inhabited as it waned. This unconventional periodization, extending far beyond Weckmann's notion of a delayed Iberian Middle Ages, informed Buñuel's cinematic medievalism. His fascination with the period motivated him to incorporate or draw inspiration from Late Antique and medieval sources —the lives of Priscillian and Symeon the Stylite, the works of Gonzalo de Berceo and Jacobus de Voragine— or to meditate on the popular medieval themes of Christian doctrine, asceticism, and pilgrimage.

Simón del desierto and *La Voie Lactée* restage elements of medieval history and narrative, and some of their thematic appeal stemmed from Buñuel's romantic notions of the period. His statements across multiple interviews make explicit his conception of the Middle Ages as a period of quieter, more isolated, and contemplative existence; however, these features held appeal not for religious reasons but rather for their imaginatively generative potential. The significance of Buñuel's filmmaking to the study of medievalism stems less from his historical subject matter than from his strategies for altering human perception: the interpenetration of spaces, time periods, and individual identities; the mixing of languages; and the ambiguous treatment of spiritual vision as tangible presence.

Buñuel describes dreams and reveries as "el 'primer cine' que inventó el hombre" (Colina and Pérez Turrent 1986: 165), projecting the history of the cinema back before any technological development and speaking to the natural kinship between the medium's capacities

and the types of vision that Augustine would have categorized as spiritual. His representations of dreams, miraculous and demonic apparitions, and fluid experiences of time, space, and identity all mirror traditions that similarly predate motion-picture technologies. Yet the resonances between Buñuel's *visio spiritalis* and medieval ritual and visual culture are not the simple result of nostalgia; Buñuel looked to the past to seek the radical future of filmmaking.

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