

Luis Bunuel

1900-1982

"They call Bunuel everything: traitor, anarchist ,pervert, defamer, iconoclast. But lunatic they do not call him."

Henry Miller 1932

Identifying data: Famous Spanish film maker. Co-creator & director of 'Un Chien andalou'. Dreamer.

Development: Born in Calanda near Saragossa in Aragon region of Spain on 22nd Feb 1900 where according to his autobiography 'the Middle Ages lasted until WW I'. He died in July 1982

Father: Leonardo. Short man of five foot seven, green-eyed, well-built muscular and very strict but 'forgiving'.

At 43 years Leonardo married Dona Maria Portoles 18yrs old & 25yrs his junior.

Luis was the first son followed by four sisters & two brothers

Mother: doted on her eldest son and funded his early career.

*From the published recollections of **Concita his oldest sister:***

'every morning Luis and mother waged their daily battle over his refusal to wear his Jesuit student cap. Although she was usually very lenient with her eldest and favourite she was inexplicably adamant on this point. Every night at dinner, we breathlessly followed the trials and tribulations of Luis's school days. I remember one evening he told us that he'd found a jesuitical undershirt in his soup at lunch. Always the staunch defender of Church, school and teachers, my father refused to believe him & when Luis insisted, he was ordered to leave the table. He got up slowly and walked proudly to the door parodying Galileo as he went, "And yet," he declaimed, "there was an undershirt!"'

Adolescence: These struggles with authority characterised his adolescence and the years to follow.

'I've often wondered why Catholicism has such a horror of sexuality. To be sure, there are countless theological, historical, and moral reasons; but it seems to me that in a rigidly hierarchical society, sex-which respects no barriers and obeys no laws-can at any moment become an agent of chaos. Desire and pleasure may be necessary, since God created them, but any suspicion of lust, any impure thought, must be ruthlessly tracked down and purged.'

'In my early teens I discovered the bathing cabanas in San Sebastian, fertile ground for *other* educational experiences. It was easy to enter one side, make a peephole in the wood, and watch the women undressing on the other side.

Unfortunately, long hatpins were in fashion, and once the women realized they were being spied upon, they would thrust their hatpins into the holes, blithely unconcerned about putting out a curious eye.'

Of those years Bunuel wrote, 'given this heavy dosage of death and religion it stood to reason that our joie de vivre was stronger than most...in the end we were worn out with our oppressive sense of sin, coupled with the interminable war between instinct and virtue'.

He wrote: 'One of Calancia's intellectuals, a fierce Republican, a doctor named Don Leoncio, would have roared with laughter had he known of our struggles with our consciences. Don Leoncio papered his office walls with full-colour pages from El Motin, a violently anti-clerical and pro-anarchist journal with a wide circulation. I remember one cartoon vividly: two well-fed priests sitting in a small cart while Christ, harnessed to the shafts, sweats and grimaces with the effort.'

'Ironically, this implacable Catholic prohibition inspired a feeling of sin which for me was positively voluptuous. And although I'm not sure why, I also have always felt a secret but constant link between the sexual act and death.'

'I've tried to translate this inexplicable feeling into images, as in Un Chien andalou when the man caresses the woman's bare breasts as his face slowly changes into a death mask. Surely the powerful sexual repression of my youth reinforces this connection.'

University: At 23 Bunuel was studying philosophy in Madrid. This was an era of massive social change in Spain, the fall by assassination of the monarchy at the hands of the Anarchists & the rise of the Republic before Franco's Fascism crushed it in the Spanish civil war, the prelude to WW II.

A telegram arrived announcing father's imminent death.

He wrote: 'Father was very weak from pneumonia when I arrived; I told him I'd come back to do some entomological research, to which he replied that I should take good care of my mother.'

He died four hours later. When the whole family gathered that evening, there wasn't a centimetre of breathing space. Finally, everyone went to bed. I remained alone with the body... sat by my father's bedside....drank cognac steadily; sometimes I thought I saw him breathing. It was May and the air was filled with the perfume of flowering acacias.'

'Suddenly I heard a loud noise in the dining room, as if a chair had been thrown against the wall. I spun around and there was my father, standing up, an angry look on his face, his arms outstretched. This hallucination-the only real one I've ever experienced-last-ed no more than ten seconds, but that was long enough for me to decide that I needed some sleep.....after the funeral I slept in my father's bed & just in case the ghost decided to reappear, I slipped a revolver-a handsome piece with my father's initials inlaid with mother-of-pearl-under the pillow. (Needless to say, my sleep was thoroughly uneventful.)'

'My father's death was a decisive moment for me & for many days afterwards, I wore his boots, sat at his desk, and smoked his Havanas.'

'My mother was barely forty when I took over as head of the household (at 23).'

Surrealism: Typically he was a bourgeois son revolting against the narrowness of bourgeois society. This is his lifelong theme. Years later in his 70s he won an Oscar for his biting satirical film 'The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie.' Bunuel became associated with the Surrealist movement of which he wrote: 'My dreams always full of the same familiar obstacles. The dreams themselves, as well as the pleasure of dreaming are the single most important thing I share with the Surrealists.'

'All of us were supporters of a certain concept of revolution constantly fighting a despised society. The real purpose of Surrealism was not to create a new artistic or even philosophical movement but to explode the social order, to transform life itself. Our morality may have been more demanding than the prevailing order but it was also stronger, richer and more coherent....I am a fanatical anti-fanatic.'

His first film financed by his mother was *Un Chien andalou* made in 1929 with Salvador Dali. Bunuel wrote 'I remember when Jung saw *Un Chien andalou* he'd called it a fine example of dementia praecox.' In planning a subsequent film on schizophrenia, he visited (Franz) Alexander, a disciple of Freud's in Chicago who ran a psychoanalytical institute. Initially encouraging, Alexander professed to be delighted when offered a copy of *Un Chien andalou*. He wrote, 'Afterwards a letter arrived from Dr Alexander telling me that he had seen the film & had been "scared to death". 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?'

With that brief biographical sketch lets go to Bunuel's dreams.....