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### **Luis Buñuel's *Las Hurdes* (1933)**

It has been claimed that *Las Hurdes* is a dialectical film – dialectical in the Hegelian sense. I wish to argue, to the contrary, that *Las Hurdes* operates by turning dialectical logic, the logic of idealism, against itself. The strategy should be familiar to readers, for it is that which Frantz Fanon proposed in *The Wretched of The Earth*. Fanon argued that Hegel's understanding of the dialectical process was distorted by its religious undergirdings. So he formulated what he believed was true understanding of the character of the dialectical process. According to Fanon, the pair of elements yoked in a dialectical antithesis are held in opposition that cannot be sublated. "The two zones are opposed," wrote Fanon "but not in the service of a higher unity . . . they both follow the logic of reciprocal exclusivity. No conciliation is possible" If no higher unity can be achieved, reason fails in its mediating role: the opposites are simply inscrutable to one another and the relation between them fundamentally irrational.

The same conceptual trope that Fanon used in his rejection of sunny Hegelian rationality had been employed decades earlier by the renegade Surrealist, Georges Bataille. In 1930, the Surrealist movement fissured, the dominant group siding with André Breton, the minority group with Georges Bataille. The issue on which the group split was that of Breton's idealist (Hegelian) tendencies. Bataille accused it of, inter alia, selling out to the art market and of escaping what is base, undesirable and excremental in society. Against Breton's tack, of endeavouring to escape from all that is base, Bataille asserted that thinking – *genuine* thinking – must acknowledge and explore all that is "base"; in contrast to Breton's idealism, for Bataille it is impossible for the real thinker to behave "other than a pig who rummages in manure and mud uprooting everything with his snout."

Buñuel's biographer, John Baxter, points out that while Buñuel was a signatory to the 1930 Surrealist manifesto that included a condemnation of Bataille, excoriating him for his remarks on Breton's idealistic tendencies., Buñuel gradually moved closer to the Bataillean position. *Las Hurdes* reflects Bataille's vision and Bataille's criticism of the Breton's metaphysics – indeed the film's criticisms of the Bretonian position are so close to Bataille's own that it is hard to believe that it is not a conscious exercise in Bataillism.

Breton's quest was for the purity of thought: "Let him, in spite of any restrictions, use the avenging arm of the idea against bestiality of all beings and all things, and let him one day, vanquished - *but vanquished only if the world is the world* - welcome the discharge of his sad rifles like a salvo fired in salute." Breton had recoiled from the bestiality of reality, the cruelty of which was incomprehensible. His response was to "wrench thought away from increasingly difficult bondage" so as to put thought "back on the path of total comprehension, to return it to its original purity." It was exactly this response, of recoiling from reality to take refuge in a total comprehension, to which Bataille objected. Bataille embraced the "bestiality of all beings and all things." Thus Breton accused Bataille of being obsessed with the "befouled, senile, rank, sordid, lewd, doddering" aspects of existence that Breton was bent on transcending by ascending to the absolute, to what he called "surreality." Reality confronts us with a cruelty that is utterly incomprehensible, a reality that exceeds what reason can grasp, Bataille insisted.

Bataille rejected Breton's strategy of recoil, characterizing it as "Icarian": "From one who spreads across the heavens, full of aggressive respect for heaven and its lightning bolts, full of disgust for this too base world that he believes he scorns – scorns more than anyone has ever scorned it before him – after touching Icarian naivité has betrayed his desire for the miraculous, we can only expect . . . the betrayal of the vulgar interests of the collectivity, which have become simply filth, a pretext to rise with cries of disgust." But if Bataille encouraged thinkers to

overcome their contempt for the baseness of reality, *Las Hurdes*, practices what Bataille had recommended. Buñuel accepted another aspect of Bataille's counsel, as *Las Hurdes* reveals that the filmmakers betrayed the interests of the inhabitants of *Las Hurdes* when they refuse to help neither the donkey being swarmed by bees nor the man and woman afflicted with fever because, presumably, not doing so makes a better film.

Bataille's conviction that reality's cruelty is utterly unfathomable is a consequence of his conception of the heterogeneous, and his science of the heterogeneous, heterology. In one of its meanings, the term "heterogeneous" refers to the opposite in an antithetical structure. In another of its meanings it refers to what is most distant from the objects of everyday experience; in this sense, its meaning approximates that of Rudolf Otto's famous expression, that of "the Wholly Other" ("*das ganz Andere*"). Both meanings are important to Bataille's concept of the heterogeneous, but it is the latter that is perhaps the more important – indeed, Bataille actually uses Rudolf Otto's phrase on several occasions. In this sense it names a supreme, non-human Being, a Being whose Being, unlike that of another other being, derives from nothing, a Being who creates the world.

That is the strong meaning of the term "heterogeneous," the meaning which ground all the other senses in which Bataille uses the term. For Bataille also used the term in a broader sense, as referring to that which disrupts and disturbs the order of the domain whose elements are all commensurate the one with the other. Science, Bataille pointed out, had established a world the contents of which can be measured, and so can be compared with one another. In this way, the laws of science establish a world of identity. The regulatory regime of fixed and stable identity thus guarantees a continuity – a homogeneity – between the persons who constitute the social sphere and the products that they assimilate, a homogeneity between the possessor and the object possessed. It ensures, that is to say, a general homogeneity of the productive sphere.

Bataille sees that social organisms, like biological organisms, are characterized by two complementary movements: that of appropriation and that of rejection. The movement of rejection defines the heterogenous. Thus Bataille set out as concrete examples of heterogeneity:

Sexual activity, whether perverted or not; the behaviour of one sex before the other; defecation; urination; death and the cult of cadavers (above all, insofar as it involves the stinking decomposition of bodies; the different taboos; ritual cannibalism; the sacrifice of animal-gods; homophagia; the laughter of exclusion; sobbing (which, in general has death as its object); religious ecstasy; the identical attitude towards shit, gods, and cadavers; terror that so often accompanies involuntary defecation; the custom of exchanging brilliant, lubricious, painted and jewelled women; gambling; heedless expenditure and certain fanciful uses of money, etc. . . . together present a common character in that the object of the activity (excrement, shameful parts, cadavers, etc. . . .) is found each time treated as a foreign body (*das ganz Anderes*); in other words, it can just as well be expelled following a brutal rupture, as reabsorbed through the desire to put one's body and mind entirely in a more or less violent state of expulsion (or projection). The notion of the (heterogeneous) *foreign body* permits one to note the elementary subjective identity between types of excrement (sperm, menstrual blood, urine, fecal matter) and everything can be seen as sacred, divine or marvellous.

*Las Hurdes*, I suggest, is a film that suggests that the dirty, the soiled, the damaged is sacred, divine and marvellous – sacred, divine and marvellous precisely for its irrationality. Bataille's heterology was essentially a project to strip away ideological screens or veils, to expose the (bourgeois) hypocrisies which attempt to make palatable a basically meaningless and squalid

existence. But that is very much the tenor of Buñuel's *Las Hurdes*, too.

But that it is getting ahead of the argument. We must spend more time with Bataille to discern precisely how *Las Hurdes* figures the divine as sacred. The passage just quoted, concerning assimilation and expulsion, describes a complex relation between the agency (force/person) that is doing the expelling and the element that is expelled. For the element expelled is assigned the role of the Wholly Other – of “*das ganz Andere*.” Bataille conceives of the relation of relation between the expelled element and the domain from which it is expelled as some sort of dialectical relation: the antithetical terms mutually affect one another – the expelled element “can just as well be expelled following a brutal rupture [opposition, as in a dialectical relation], as reabsorbed [interaction between the dialectical pair]. . . .” In these respects, at least, the relation is dialectical, in the Hegelian sense. But, as we have seen, Bataille's idea of the dialectic was anything but Hegelian; and what separates him from Hegel is one point that Bataille's repeated use of the term “*das ganz Andere*” highlights: in the relation between heterogeneous elements, the dialectical terms are never reconciled in a higher unity. Hegel's dialectics propose that the antithetical pair oppose in respect to some attribute with regard to which they differ; that is, terms of single feature class must apply to both of the antithetical terms (though each of the antithetical terms must be qualified by different members of that feature class). Features belonging to a single category must be ascribable to both, and hence both members the dialectical pair must share the characteristic that members of the feature class can be applied to them. In a heterological relation, to the contrary, the terms are entirely different, wholly other. The expelled element is not just different to (other than) the domain from which it is expelled in some respect or another – it is entirely other.

“Heterology” is the term that Bataille gave to the science dedicated to effort to comprehend the heterogeneous. Heterology of course cannot be science or a discipline like those with which we are familiar, for the heterogeneous is exactly that which resists being formed into identities that can be formulated as laws. Nonetheless, the effort to expose, to formulate knowledge – knowledge of *some* sort – of what resists being known is the drive that impelled Bataille's work. But so it is with *Las Hurdes* – it is a film impelled by the desire to know what cannot be known, viz., why the Hurdanos continue to leave the miserable existence that they do.

But, again, that is getting ahead of the argument. Before considering the film, we must deliberate on the fact that Bataille defines the object of heterology through its relation to the sacred. To be sure, the effort to comprehend the relation between the sacred and the profane in a total system of a general economy was characteristic of French sociology of Bataille's era, and that tendency influenced Bataille's thought. But to this strain of ideas, Bataille contributed the notion that sacred things have an essentially repugnant character; Bataille even propounded an ethic that claimed that humans are bound to what provokes in them the greatest disgust – and that, to be sure, is another idea that surfaces in a form in *Las Hurdes*, for the Hurdanos are bound that which more than anything else humiliates and degrades them (even if it does not exactly disgust them). And if the unfathomable (and therefore irrational) conditions in which the Hurdanos live simply serve to humiliate and degrade them, they are no less sacred for that. That is a lesson that Bataille could well have taught Luis Buñuel.

The concept of the heterogeneous was central to Bataille's view of art. Bataille asserted that art aspires to embrace the totality and, in doing so, to reconstitute the whole person. But artworks are inevitably lame (to use a word that Bataille favoured), debilitated by their inability to comprehend the whole. Bataille described the effects of the rupture

The servants of science have excluded human destiny from the world of truth, and the servants of art have renounced make a true world out of what an anxious destiny has caused them to bring forth. But for all that it is not it is not it is not easy to escape the necessity of a real, and not a fictive, life. The servants of art can accept for their creations the fugitive evidence of shadows, nevertheless they

themselves must enter living into the kingdom of truth, money, glory and social rank. It is thus impossible for them to have anything other than a lame life. They often think that they are possessed by what they represent, but that which has no existence possesses nothing: they are only truly possessed by their careers. Romanticism replaces the gods who possess from the outside with the unfortunate destiny of the poet, but through this he is far from escaping lameness; romanticism has only made misfortune into a new form of career and has made the lies of those it has killed even more tiresome.

The Surrealists revolted against the lame life – and Buñuel, we might imagine, in making *Las Hurdes* might have been striving to renounce the fictive “kingdom of truth, money, glory, and social status” – by escaping to a domain dispossessed of those qualities. The Hurdanos, certainly, lacked truth, money, glory and social status. But we must assess the success of the strategy underlying Buñuel’s decision, that of turning toward the downcast in order to establish a relation with a brute reality. That strategy we must acknowledge to be characteristically Surrealist (and especially so at the time when the Surrealist joined the PCF). But *Las Hurdes* shows in fact that that strategy is an abject failure: for one thing, the life of the Hurdanos turns out to be too incomprehensible, too fundamentally irrational, to allow merely observing them to force a confrontation with a brute reality. Observation provides no conduit to the heterogeneous reality they live so close to – the narrator’s complacently advancing untruths suggests this very sort of isolation, of lack of access to the truth of the heterogeneous.

The inaccessibility of truth creates a dilemma for the artist, a dilemma that riddles Bataille’s heterology and Buñuel’s filmmaking alike: to not expose oneself to the wholly other condemns one to lame existence, for only the wholly other has the power to restore one to total life, the form of existence required to produce authentic. But whatever efforts one makes, they are doomed to failure, for the heterogeneous can never be fathomed, can never be understood. Even if one goes to extremes to encounter the heterogeneous – and because they sense that the encounter with what is most extreme, with what is most repugnant is the condition for encounter with the sacred, artists are often willing to give themselves to the quest – and that quest is doomed to failure.

Buñuel’s film, insofar as it is an effort to identify with the Hurdanos (and it must be acknowledged that it is only partly that, for it also shows itself out of sympathy with them) is a Bataillian film – Bataillian in its interest in the heterogeneity of the sacred grotesque and Bataillian in his tragic realization that what is required to reconstitute the integrity of the human person is unattainable. Like Bataille’s heterology, *Las Hurdes* offers an *atheology*: it concerns the divine vacancy, the vacancy of the site that is occupied only by the name of God, the God that should be the guarantor of the integrity of the human person, but cannot; as all atheology does, it speaks of the vacancy of the self, the maimed and crippled self, whom we see in the film, but also hear in the voice of the narrator. That is fundamental horror of the film: the narrator (who can be taken as a stand-in for the filmmaker) is as maimed as the figures before the camera.

Remember, however, that for Bataille, that fact that the self is lame, crippled, and vacant – that the self is *lost* – makes sin possible; indeed, reading passages from Bataille sometimes leave the impression that the loss of identity is constitutive of sin. This is another filiation between *Las Hurdes* and Bataille’s writings that this portrait of the crippled humans also presents his most despairing portrait of sin as unredeemable. Buñuel for the most part is a marvellously charitable filmmaker, but in *Las Hurdes* we see that his charity had departed, however briefly. Thus Lastra comments that the real critical power of the film is “inextricable from its darker side – the dehumanization and repudiation of its subjects. These are the source of the its vehemence and its pathos . . .”

Thought cannot grasp Being in its entirety and that inability makes it lame. That lameness – physical, spiritual, metaphysical and moral – is a principal subject of Buñuel’s film.

But to take up that point right now once again would be to leap ahead of the story. For we must first consider the implications of Bataille's heterology had for his anthropology, as that deliberation will take us to heart of Buñuel's film which, after all is said and done, is an exercise in Bataillean anthropology. Bataille's heterology is founded upon the concepts of assimilation and excretion, so it is not surprising that Bataille defines what it is to be a human, *anthropos*, through those same functions. The double process of assimilation and excretion models the role that the transcendent, the divine, the Wholly Other has in human existence (and conversely the transcendent provides a model for our understanding of the processes of assimilation and excretion). Bataille pointed out that the introduction of a foreign body (a "*ganz Andere*") into a host body destroys the integrity of that body into which it is introduced by shattering its homogeneity – the immediate knowledge of the different brings to an end the body's integrity, its "sameness." It thus becomes impure, soiled, invaded by a difference that cannot be explained – and its character is suddenly turned excretory. An anthropology that has taken heterology into its core is an anthropology that testifies to the fundamental importance of the functions of assimilation and excretion; the radical acknowledgement of excretions brings that anthropology up against a space that is unmastered and unmasterable, an anthropology that speaks of unfathomable loss and irrational expenditure. It is an anthropology whose character is "the complete reversal of the philosophical process, which ceases to be the instrument of appropriation, and now serves excretion." Bataille understood the function of excretion this as laying the groundwork for a metaphysics of violence, and not just a metaphysics, but in its train, a society of violence: "it [this reversal] introduces the demand for the violent gratifications implied by social life." *Las Hurdes*, after all, depicts "human refuse," a society given to violent gratifications – violent gratifications that are fundamentally unfathomable; but while they cannot be accounted for, are nonetheless related to the Hurdanos' status as the repudiated, the rejected, the expelled. What is more, Buñuel's film answers the violence of Hurdano existence with a violence of its own, a violence suggested in the scene of the goat tumbling down the mountain side.

This violence is reflected in the filmmakers' repudiation (expulsion) of their subject, the Hurdanos, from the domain of civilized, "proper" existence. A litany of descriptions expound the sheer misery of the Hurdano existence: We hear first that the urchin school children are starving and wear rags to school. We are told that "Until very recently bread was unknown to the Hurdanos," an extraordinary statement that emphasizes the sheer otherness of Hurdano existence. Another statement that emphasizes the bizarre otherness of the Hurdanos is the comment that the Hurdano have never seen a plough. We see school children eating bread and are told that "The bread these children are eating was given to them at school. The master usually makes them eat it in front of him for fear that it may be taken away from them by their half-starved parents" (an accusation that has the effect of expelling the Hurdanos from membership in the "civilized" world, in which parents sacrifice for children). At another point, we are told that, on arriving "in Martinandran, we are greeted by the ugly rasp of coughing. tending to children walk up the street. Most of the inhabitants of this miserable village are sick." The narrator even seems to explicitly condemn the misery of the Hurdano, for he describes a Hurdano group as a "choir of idiots."

One motif that highlights the squalor of the Hurdanos' life is articulated in both the narration; that motif suggests the close proximity of the Hurdanos to animals; doubtless the motif implies ontological as well as geographic proximity. In a *Documents* text entitled "Abattoir," Bataille links slaughterhouses and religion to tell us what we cannot stand the sight of, viz., our proximity to animals, our dirty selves, for those revealing our filthy self's proximity to animality exposes the hypocrisy and dishonesty laying at the heart of bourgeois society. Bataille writes:

The slaughterhouse relates to religion in the sense that temples of times past . . . had two purposes, serving simultaneously for prayers and for slaughter.

Nowadays the slaughterhouse is cursed and quarantined like a boat with cholera aboard . . . The victims of this curse are neither the butchers nor the animals, but those fine folk who have reached the point of not being able to stand their own unseemliness.

Bataille's stress on man's proximity to animals was weapon in his continual attack on human's idealized self-image. Animality constitutes an heterogeneous element.

We cling tenaciously to the dissimilarities that set us apart from the animal. Anything that recalls the animality subsisting in us, appalls us unfailingly and, quite like a prohibition, makes us recoil in horror.

If this is a anthropological/ethnographic film, it is certainly an anthropology with a difference – different from the ordinary anthropological/ethnographic film in much the same way that Bataille's heterology differs from orthodox science. Of course we can account for the differences in part by the influence of "Surrealism," i.e., generic Surrealism. But even more apposite is the influence of the dissident Surrealists, i.e., the particular brand of Surrealism associated with Pierre Unik, Louis Aragon, the film historian-to-be Georges Sadoul, and, of course, Georges Bataille. Buñuel was explicit about that: "I made *Las Hurdes* because I had a surrealist vision, and because I was interested myself in human problems. It was reality in a different way than I'd have seen before surrealism. I was sure of that, and Pierre Unik also." As Helen Lewis' *The Politics of Surrealism* points out, the issues that separated the Surrealism of Bataille's group from that Breton's came to head with the World's Colonial Exhibition of 1931, an exhibition the celebrated the supposed superiority of the world's colonial powers and their assimilation/appropriation of the cultural artifacts of the colonized. North African religious relics, ceremonial masks of Oceania, sculpture from Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and Senegal – all "tribal" objects are put in display in such exhibitions as they are in the great ethnographic museum in Dahlem – and all become an homogenous "other" to the norm of European culture. There were, among the Surrealists those who succumbed to the lure of the other, to the spell of "tribal" culture and "primitive" objects, to the allure of the "Mysterious East" or "Primitive Africa" as Utopian cultures (as many people today still do).

Louis Aragon, Georges Sadoul, and Pierre Unik were not among them: in response to the World Colonial Exposition, the band of dissident Surrealist published a pamphlet, *Don't Visit the Colonial Exposition*. and condemned what they referred to as the "colonialist banditry" and the heroization of an imperialist "Greater France." The conviction that the Surrealists consigned the Other – the *exoticized* Other – to a degraded condition Buñuel conveyed in his statement about the Surrealist establishment:

I was beginning not to agree with that kind of intellectual aristocracy, with its moral and artistic extremes, which isolated us from the world and limited us to our own company. Surrealists considered the majority of mankind contemptible or stupid, and thus withdrew from all social participation and responsibility and shunned the work of the others.

The most profound level of at which the Bataille/Aragon/Sadoul/Unik version of Surrealism – the version with which André Masson, Michel Leiris, Antonin Artaud and Raymond Queneau would later affiliate themselves – challenged Breton's version, alleging that a certain template dominated it. They recognized the enormous irony in this, for, as we have seen, the pattern that dominated Breton's thinking, the pattern of the dialectic, had been used by Hegel to demonstrate the identity of the real and the rational – so it was hardly a template with which one might have expected the Surrealists to be sympathetic. The dissident Surrealists recognized the

remarkable persistence of dialectical thinking – its stubbornness insistence had lead their erstwhile colleagues to their enthusiasm for them World Colonial Exhibition. The Breton group conceived of the relation between colonizer and colonized as a dialectical relation, in which the identity of each depended on its relation to an antithetical term, an other. Bataille and his associates recognized that even though, according to this conception, one term becomes politically dominant while the other is dominated (the Master/Slave relation is exemplary in this regard), the two terms must, on this conception, have a type of metaphysical equality that allows them to enter into a relation with each other (e.g. that allows Master and Slave to form the anthropogenetic Master/Slave relation in which each term creates the other). Such relations are notorious for producing a cycle in which one of the terms is first elevated from a subordinate position, then once gain reduced to status of the subordinate. Thus, the master/slave relation eventually demonstrates the truth of the Christian conviction that the lowly shall be is raised up and the mighty cast down, as the slave, through his or her closeness to the material of reality, rises to ascendancy over the master. Breton's celebration of the colonized displays the same dynamic, as the down-trodden colonized are raised up by becoming the object of colonialist veneration, and the colonizer cast down, into the position of the collector of exotic artifacts, artifacts which are produced by experiences to which the colonizer is not privy.

Bataille understood that dialectical relations are responsible for producing hierarchies, and Bataille was fundamentally against hierarchical rankings. The antipathy against hierarchies is the basis of the anthropology he expounds in "The Mouth." There Bataille pointed out that with four-legged created the creatures, the mouth is identified as the beginning of the body, with the beginning implicitly representing the noble term and the end (the anus) the ignoble. When primates assumed an erect posture, the mouth ceased to be "the beginning" of body; and when the mouth lost that position, no longer could a hierarchy be established amongst the organs: As the mouth lost its priority, all organs became equally base.

Bataille's thought tilted against the mechanism that produces such hierarchies, i.e., dialectical thinking, which, as we have seen, because the dialectic is based on the assumption that the terms in a dialectical relation have a common metaphysical ground. For Bataille, the significant 'significant other,' the other that really constitutes our core, is radically different, radically other – this accounts for the need for heterology to come forth, perhaps not as science like the existing science, but nevertheless as science. Hence Bataille refused to create a hierarchy between animals and humans for example. But consider how *Las Hurdes* compares humans to animals.

Above all, heterological thought was to ruin philosophical system-building to waste.

When one says that heterology scientifically considers questions of heterogeneity, one does not mean that heterology is, in the usual sense of such a formulation, the science of the heterogeneous . . . above all heterology is opposed to any to any homogeneous representation of the world, to any philosophical system..

Previous anthropologist/philosophers who had studied the Hurdanos, José G. Castro and and the great philosopher of reason's limits, Miguel de Unamuno, had practiced a dialectical anthropology: they saw *Las Hurdes* as a dialectical other existing in the heart of Spain (and, for good or ill, having a role in establishing Spain's character, just as the antithetical term in a dialectical relation establishes the character of antithetical relatum); and Castro and Unamuno attempt, after the fashion of dialectical anthropology, to show how *Las Hurdes* can be reconciled with (read "homogenized with") the rest of Spain. Against dialectical anthropology, Buñuel created a film that does not offer "any homogeneous representation of the world" (to use that phrase from Bataille's "The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade").

Not only is *Las Hurdes* an heterological study of the Hurdanos, it is also composed of heterological elements, that is to say, of elements that refuse to be reduced to an homogeneity,

to a set of elements that can be integrated into a form that reconciles the differences amongst them.. The dialectic is too lame to form such a totality. The film includes sequences that treat the typical subjects of ethnographic investigation. Thus there are sequences dealing with the physical and cultural geography (landscape and architecture), education, religion, economy and sustenance (agriculture), nutrition and health, morality and religion. Yet the parts refuse to cohere into an consistent analysis of Hurdano life, or even into a comprehensive and self-consistent commentary on the character of their life. A good example of this is the extraordinary sequence presenting a text-book analysis of mosquitos (insects appear frequently in Buñuel's films, and insects are a paradigmatic instance of Bataille's heterological). This sequence that seems to break with the texture of the rest of the film – it *seems* to, until one realizes that other sections of the film are not compellingly integrated with one another. But the strongest evidence of the heterogeneity of the elements that constitute the film can found in the disparity of elements that constitute the sound and the image. Thus, we are told that the Hurdanos keep no domesticated animals and so eat only potatoes; nonetheless we see pigs in the street. We are told that a "Land without Bread" (specifically, to emphasize the rarity of bread are told that bread is so rare that the parents would steal the bread the school-master gives to the children if he did not require them to consume the bread in their presence, and that people make a long trek to Salamanca and return with bread, and the sick are given bread soaked in goat milk as a special "treat," to fortify them); nonetheless we see children eating bread.

All in all, the presentation refuses to consolidate itself in a single, fixed viewpoint on the Hurdanos and their life. We are presented with an array of pieces of information and misinformation, of fact, fiction and confabulation, that does not cohere in balanced, objective view of Hurdano life. We are presented with irreconcilable statements and depictions of Las Hurdes, many of which cast doubt upon others. In this way, *Las Hurdes* repudiates the claim to authoritative representation for which the documentary film generally strives.

The heterogeneity of the films elements mirrors the filmmakers' inability to onsolidate their experience into an overarching view of Hurdano life; the Hurdanos remainineluctably other. Lastra points out correctly the film contains a terrible variant of the initiatory scene – a scene that ethnographic films present and show that the ethnographic investigator/filmmaker "[t]ypically . . . , after some suspicion, visitor and native come to accept one another as they demonstrate their peacefulness and generosity." In this case, though, the variant shows the investigators stumbling onto a ceremony which, far from forging links between investigator and subject, further distances them (the narrator describes the rite as "strange and barbaric."). The scene depicts the recent bridegrooms of La Alberca riding past roosters that are hung up by their feet and, at full gallop, tearing their heads off. After their contest, the bridegrooms; in what might be considered almost a bizarre parody of the sacrament of communion, get drunk on wine (here, as in communion, a symbolic representation of the blood of the sacrificial victim). Lastra comments on the ritual: "Rather than reinforcing a sense of shared humanity, the ceremony suggests that a fundamental aggressivity underlies all relations, particularly those between men and women." Lastra's comments are perspicacious (though I do not see much justification for the interpreting the scene as a gloss on sexual politics), but to my mind, they skirt the fundamental significance of Buñuel's variant of the initiatory scene. The function of the initiatory scene in ethnographic films is that it reduces the other to the same. Buñuel wanted to avoid exactly that – he wanted to figure the other as heterological, to maintain otherness as a terrifying, abject and sacred phenomenon. Through this transformation of the initiatory scene, Buñuel alerts us that his is an heterological document.

That *Las Hurdes* is supposed to be a land without bread, as one of the titles of the film has it, itself suggests that the difference so extreme, and a consequence of such a deep and thorough-going abjection, that it cannot be reduced to be some form that has important similarities with our own existence – the lack is just too great a deprivation. The lack of collectible items in the region, whether songs, dances, folklore or costume, reinforce suggestions of



abjection. Their abjection insures their otherness, for it thwarts the mechanism by which we might reduce the Hurdanos to sameness. Most travelogues present exotic locations as a paradise onto which we can project our fantasies. Buñuel's film does not do this: as a heterological text, it eschews such mechanisms inasmuch as they propose the identity between the objects of our desires and the actual reality depicted.

Thus, as Buñuel/the narrator observes the Hurdanos, he sees signs of what we might expect him to read as signs of the same, but which he interprets as signs of difference. Thus, when he sees a baby decorated with the Christian pendants, we expect Buñuel/the narrator to recognize that the Hurdanos share a religious background with the rest of Spain. This is not what he does. Instead, he describes them as further evidence of Hurdanos' otherness: the pendants, the narrator states, can be compared only "with those worn by the barbaric tribes of Africa and Oceania."

There is a further significance of the filmmakers' encountering the baby dressed in Christian pendants. A subtext of the film concerns the Hurdanos' background: a commonplace of Spanish ethnography of the time was that the Hurdanos were remnants of a Jewish community. Viewers who know this (it is not stated in the narration) can see in the faces of the Hurdanos features they might be disposed to interpret as signs of their Sephardic heritage. Their origin inflects how we read their status – we understand that their condition is one of a thorough-going abjectness – the Jews in Europe at the time (it was not long before the beginning of the Spanish Civil War) had a place among the outcasts, they were among the most rejected, the most downtrodden, in society. The film keeps insisting on the wretchedness and squalor of their existence, and in an heterological text such as this, the abject, downtrodden existence of these descendants of Sephardic Jews imbues with them character of the sacred. Their Jewishness makes their decorating their tiny children with Christian pendants just that much more like the appropriative activities of the "barbaric tribes of Africa and Oceania." Like them, they use the Christian religious objects either as charms or as decoration; but however they use them, their adoption shows just the extent of Hurdanos difference from the culture to which they belong.

At other points in the film, the narrator implies the Hurdanos' heterogeneous status by pointing out Spain's efforts to assimilate the Hurdanos, to reduce them to homogeneity. We hear that "these bare-footed urchins receive exactly the same education as children all over the world," that "These children are famished, but they are taught the sum of the angles of a triangle equal two right angles," "the dumbfounded comment of the narrator who see a picture of a very well-dressed aristocratic woman in this class of the wretchedly impoverished, "Why is this absurd picture here," and, the most brutally excoriating of all such remarks in the film, "even these children are taught the golden rule."