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SEQ CHAPTER \h \r 1 Luis Buñuel's *Las Hurdes* (1933)

Luis Buñuel's *Las Hurdes* is commonly said to be a dialectical film, "dialectical" in the Hegelian sense. To the contrary, I wish to argue that *Las Hurdes* operates by turning dialectical logic, the logic of idealism, against itself. The strategy should be familiar to readers who know Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of The Earth*. Fanon argued that Hegel's understanding of the dialectical process was distorted by its religious undergirdings. He believed that the true implication of dialectics was that a pair of elements became yoked in their antithesis, and held in an opposition that could not 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: opposites are simply inscrutable to one another and the relation between them is fundamentally irrational.

The same claims against sunny Hegelian rationality had been made decades earlier by the renegade Surrealist Georges Bataille. In 1930, the Surrealist movement fissured, a dominant group siding with André Breton, a minority with Georges Bataille. The issue was Breton's idealist (Hegelian) tendencies. Bataille accused Breton's Surrealism, *inter alia*, of selling out to the art market and escaping the undesirable and

excremental in society; Bataille asserted that thinking – *genuine* thinking – must acknowledge and explore all that is “base.” Against Breton’s idealism, Bataille proclaimed it 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, he gradually moved closer to Bataille’s position. *Las Hurdes* reflects Bataille’s vision and criticism of Breton’s metaphysics. In fact, it is hard to believe that the film 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 retreated from the bestiality of reality, the cruelty of which was incomprehensible, that is, beyond the grasp of reason. His response was to “wrench thought away from increasingly difficult bondage,” and put it “back on the path of total comprehension, to return it to its original purity.” Bataille rejected Breton’s solution. 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.” Breton was bent on transcending these aspects by ascending to the absolute, to what he called “surreality.” Bataille insisted that cruelty

must be confronted. He characterized Breton's strategy of recoil 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.

If Bataille encouraged thinkers to overcome their contempt for the baseness of reality, *Las Hurdes* practices what Bataille recommended. It appears that Buñuel accepted Bataille's counsel about the "betrayal of the vulgar interests of the collectivity," for instance, when, in the film, the filmmakers refuse to help either the donkey being swarmed by bees or the man and woman afflicted with fever. Presumably, refusing to intervene made for a better film, even if it worked against the interests of the Hurdanos.

Bataille's belief in reality's unfathomable cruelty stemmed from his multi-nuanced conception of the "heterogeneous." In one of its meanings, the term "heterogeneous" refers to the opposite in an antithetical structure. It also refers to what is most distant from the objects of everyday experience. In this second sense its meaning approximates Rudolf Otto's famous expression, "the Wholly Other" ("*das ganz Andere*"). Both meanings are important to Bataille's concept of the heterogeneous, but the latter is probably more important. Bataille actually uses Rudolf Otto's phrase on several occasions. It names a supreme, non-human Being, a Being whose Be-ing, unlike that of any other being (including humans) derives from nothing, the Being who creates the world. Bataille also used the term as referring to that which disrupts and disturbs the

order whose elements are commensurate. Science, Bataille pointed out, had established a world whose contents could be measured and so compared one to another; in this way, the laws of science establish a world of identity. The regulatory regime of fixed and stable identity thus guarantees continuity – homogeneity – between the persons who constitute the social sphere and the products that they assimilate, homogeneity between the possessor and the object possessed. It ensures a general homogeneity of the productive sphere.

Rather, Bataille saw that social organisms, like biological organisms, are characterized by two complementary movements: appropriation and rejection. The movement of rejection defines the heterogeneous. 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 marvelous.

Las Hurdes, I suggest, is a film in which the dirty, the soiled and the damaged is sacred,

divine and marvelous – sacred, divine and marvelous precisely for its irrationality.

Bataille's heterology was essentially a project to strip away ideological screens or veils, to expose the (bourgeois) hypocrisies that attempt to make palatable a basically meaningless and squalid existence. This 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) doing the expelling, and the element that is expelled. In Bataille's scheme, the element expelled is assigned the role of the Wholly Other, "*das ganz Andere*." He conceives of the 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 the relation appears to be dialectical in the Hegelian sense. But Bataille's idea of the dialectic was anything but Hegelian. What separates him from Hegel is what his 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 one another because of differing attributes. Specifically, terms relating to a 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 of the dialectical pair must share the characteristic of the members of the feature class. By contrast, in a heterological relation, the terms are entirely different, wholly other. The expelled element is not just different 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 comprehending the heterogeneous. Heterology, of course, cannot be science or a discipline in the traditional sense, for the heterogeneous is exactly that which resists being formed into identities understood through measure and lawful regularity.

Nonetheless, the drive that impelled Bataille’s work was the effort to expose, to formulate knowledge – knowledge of *some* sort – of what resists being known. And 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 live the miserable existence they do.

But, again, that is getting ahead of the argument. Before considering the film, we should remember that Bataille defines the object of heterology through its relation to the sacred. The effort to comprehend the relation between the sacred and the profane in a system of economy was characteristic of French sociology in Bataille’s era, and that tendency influenced Bataille’s thought. To this strain of ideas Bataille contributed the notion that sacred things have an essentially repugnant character. He even propounded that humans are bound to what provokes in them the greatest disgust, and that, to be

sure, is another idea that surfaces in *Las Hurdes*; the Hurdano people are bound to that which, more than anything else, humiliates and degrades them, even if it does not exactly disgust them. But if the unfathomable, and therefore irrational, conditions in which the people of Las Hurdes live humiliate and degrade them, they are no less sacred for it. 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 thereby 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 making a true world out of what an anxious destiny has caused them to bring forth. But for all that 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 by escaping to a domain dispossessed of those qualities. Perhaps Buñuel, in making *Las Hurdes*, was likewise striving to renounce the fictive "kingdom of truth, money, glory, and social status." The people of Las Hurdes qualified as fit subjects for documentary that turned away from

money, glory and social status. As we shall see, *Las Hurdes* also suggests truth's illusory, "fictive" character. Still, we must assess the success of this strategy of turning toward the downcast in order to form a relation with a brute reality. It is, surely, typically Surrealist, and even more typical of the Surrealists during the period when they decided to make common cause with the PCF.

In fact, *Las Hurdes* shows that the strategy is an abject failure. For one thing, the life of Hurdanos turns out to be so incomprehensible, so fundamentally irrational, that merely observing them does not force a confrontation with a brute reality. Mere observation provides no conduit to the heterogeneous reality of the Hurdano's (and, for that matter, any person's) life. The narrator's evident willingness to advance untruths suggests that his life has not been upset by a confrontation with the reality of the heterogeneous. Buñuel's film, insofar as it is an effort to identify with Hurdanos (and it is only partly that, for it also shows itself out of sympathy with Hurdanos) is a Bataillian film. It is Bataillian in its interest in the heterogeneity of the sacred grotesque and in the 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 who should be the guarantor of the integrity of the human person, but is not. 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 the 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. The inaccessibility of truth creates a dilemma for the artist and the philosopher, 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 one must live if one is to produce authentic art or philosophy; but whatever efforts one makes to achieve some understanding of the heterogeneous are futile, for the heterogeneous can never be fathomed. Because artists and philosophers sense that an encounter with the most extreme and repugnant opens one towards the sacred, they are often willing to sacrifice themselves in the intense quest to encounter the heterogeneous, but however excessive one's efforts, the quest is doomed to failure.

This fact is germane to *Las Hurdes'* form. Few, surely, fail to notice that the external form of *Las Hurdes* resembles a travelogue, a horrific travelogue, but a travelogue nonetheless. The tourist is the outsider. The condition of a tourist, in relation to the lands he or she passes through, is similar to an adventurous thinker's exploration of the heterogeneous – one is always the outsider, always *hors champs*.

This is also the position that the Surrealists occupied vis-à-vis the intellectuals in the P.C.F. Much has been made, quite properly, of what Marx inherited from the Romantics; that was the great revelation that followed from the rediscovery of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844. But it would be a mistake, as Louis Althusser pointed out, to diminish Marx' efforts to bring forth a science of history, a science, really, of misery, suffering and oppression. The intellectual formation of the

young Marx included a period as a “Young Hegelian” and the influence of Hegel remained with him for the rest of his life. In Hegel’s dialectic of history Marx saw the foundation of a science of process, and believed that the dialectic of history would bring forth a Communist state in which the rational would become real. He argued again and again that reason made the Communist state’s emergence inevitable, even while he denied his was a philosophy in which Reason, in the form of Mind, played the commanding role. As Marx tried to bring forth a science of history, *Las Hurdes* tries to form itself as an informational film on misery, suffering and oppression.

The intellectuals in the P.C.F. committed themselves to the intellectual labour of discerning the details of this historical (*i.e.*, rational) process. The Surrealists in general and Bataille in particular had little sympathy for these efforts: science and reason had no purchase on the irrational – on the sacred heterogeneous. Unlike the Marxists, they felt that confronting the sacred Other was necessary, to achieve what was ultimately, they believed, also the goal of Communism, that is, bringing forth the “total person” (or, as it was called in those days, the “total man”). The Surrealists, and Bataille especially, maintained that the exalted role assigned to science contributed to making the world destitute and people lame, but Bataille particularly aligned himself with the revolt against intellectuals in the name of the “whole person.” This was what distanced Bataille from the dominant Surrealist group as they became more politicized. While the majority of Surrealists devoted their efforts to formulating an ideological critique of the power of reason and logic in the Occident, Bataille allied himself more with the accursed share,

the wretched of the earth. Bataille would not put the Surrealism he had worked to bring forth in the service of the Communist revolution precisely because he believed a revolution required what the Communists avoided: to encounter the repugnant as sacred.

That the self is lame, crippled, and vacant – that the self is *lost* – was what Bataille believed makes sin possible. Passages from Bataille sometimes leave the impression that the loss of identity is actually constitutive of sin. Another filiation between *Las Hurdes* and Bataille's writings is that their portraits of crippled humans present sin as unredeemable. As noted, Buñuel for the most part is a marvelously charitable filmmaker, but in *Las Hurdes* we see his charity departed. As James Lastra notes, 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"

The quest for extreme experience, for a shock that would displace one from ordinary reality, remained a paradigmatically Surrealist quest. Walter Benjamin, whose writings reflect the rise of Surrealism and who was sympathetic to the Contre-Attaque group around Bataille, recognized that experience (that is to say, direct, immediate experience, as opposed both to phantasmic thinking and thinking that is concerned with theories,) connected individuals to the flow of life itself. It is the Surrealist's quest for brutal experience that gives the movement its revolutionary force and provokes its confrontation with bourgeois complacency, national pride and the moral stagnation of

Protestantism and Catholicism alike.

In the work of such precursors as Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Apollinaire and Dostoevsky, Benjamin found evidence of a profane illumination – profane in its direct relation to the experience of the everyday world – through which emerged a cult of evil as a political device to disinfect and inoculate its adherents against all moralizing dilettantism. Aragon, in *Le Paysan de Paris (Paris Peasant)* and Breton in *Nadja*, extended these cultic practices, for the intoxication brought on by their peregrinations around Paris fueled a radical rejection of the modern and a fascination with the debris of the past.

Incorporating the uncanny into the experience of everyday life marked a separation from bourgeois mainstream culture – and from the Hegelian notion of history as the progress of reason. But as the experience of the 1960s teaches, a revolutionary tendency that arises from “intoxication” tends towards anarchism and social tumult. Benjamin’s remarks on shock’s revolutionary potential help us account for Buñuel’s interest in the Hurdano people. Buñuel may have seen Hurdano existence as belonging to a beastly order, but their animal character does not deny them soteriologic significance.

Benjamin saw Surrealist experience as an antidote to metaphysics, and Surrealism itself as marking the rupture with metaphysics. The fusion of mind and matter dismantled the metaphysics that tradition had handed down. The reader, the thinker, the loiterer and the flâneur, Benjamin avowed, are types of *illuminati*. Through a remarkable

synthesis of the imaginary realm with the real, the reader/thinker/loiterer/flâneur merged in the mythology of Surrealism with the opium eater/dreamer/ecstatic, and the product was a revolutionary anarchism of the imagination. Delirium of this sort may have been Buñuel's response to the squalor of Hurdano existence, a response that countered the socialist's delusory optimism concerning non-bourgeois forms of life. But Buñuel's revolutionary tendencies, to say nothing of Bataille's, are no less conflicted, and no less disposed to become a form of revolutionary anarchism seeking profane illumination.

Thought cannot grasp Be-ing 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 would be to, once again, leap ahead of the story. We must first consider the implications of Bataille's heterology for his anthropology. That deliberation will take us to heart of Buñuel's film, which is after all an exercise in heterological anthropology. Buñuel drew upon previous anthropological/ethnographic investigations of the people of Las Hurdes. Maurice Legendre's anthropological study of the Hurdanos (1926), and Miguel de Unamuno's travel essay are both sources of Buñuel's film.

Bataille's heterology is founded on the concepts of assimilation and excretion so it is not surprising that Bataille defines what it is to be a human, *anthropos*, through the same functions. The double process of assimilation and excretion is the prototype for the role that the transcendent, the divine, the Wholly Other, has in human existence. 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 the 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, a difference that cannot be explained. Its character is suddenly turned excretory. An anthropology that has the heterogeneous at its core is an anthropology that testifies to the fundamental importance of the function of assimilation and excretion. The radical acknowledgement of excretion brings anthropology up against a phenomenon that is unmastered and unmasterable. Confronting these phenomena, anthropology becomes a study that speaks of unfathomable loss and irrational expenditure. It becomes 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 heterological 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 ultimately depicts "human refuse," a society given to violent gratifications that are fundamentally unfathomable. While it cannot be accounted for, the gratuitous violence is nonetheless related to Hurdanos' status as repudiated, rejected, expelled. The violence of reality manifests itself, too, in the filmmakers' depiction of Hurdanos as expelled from the domain of civilized, "proper" existence. A litany of descriptions expounds the sheer misery of Hurdano existence. We hear first that the

urchin school children are starving: “Until very recently bread was unknown to the Hurdanos . . . 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.” This allegation effectively expels the Hurdano from membership in “civilized society, in which parents sacrifice for children.” We are told that the urchins wear rags to school, another way of stressing the otherness of Hurdano existence, for Hurdanos do not adopt the civilised manners that other schools inculcate. Upon arriving “in Martinandran, we are greeted by the ugly rasp of coughing and are told that most of the inhabitants of this miserable village are sick.” The inhabitants are outcasts even from the domain of the healthy, effective lepers. The narrator himself expresses contempt for Hurdanos, implying their fate is deserved; he describes a Hurdano group as a “choir of idiots.” Buñuel’s film answers the violence of Hurdano existence with a violence of its own, suggested, for instance, in the scene of the goat tumbling down the mountainside.

A motif of squalor is articulated in both the narration and the film’s images, with a suggestion of the close proximity of the Hurdano 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 to know, that is, our proximity to animals, our dirty selves, in order to expose the hypocrisy and dishonesty lying at the heart of sanitised bourgeois society.

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 emphasis on man's proximity to animals was a weapon he used to attack human's idealized self-image.

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.

Our animality, which we strive vainly to repudiate and to expel from our self-image, constitutes a heterogeneous element that has invaded our being.

Las Hurdes as an anthropological/ethnographic film is an anthropology with a difference. It is different from the ordinary anthropological/ethnographic film in much the same way that Bataille's heterology differs from orthodox science. One difference is its Surrealism. A particular brand of Surrealism characterizes the film, a brand associated with Pierre Unik, Louis Aragon, the film historian-to-be Georges Sadoul, and, of course, Georges Bataille. As Buñiel said, "I made *Las Hurdes* because I had a surrealist vision, and because I was interested in human problems. I saw reality in a different way than I'd have seen it before surrealism. I was sure of that, as was Pierre Unik." In *The Politics of Surrealism*, Helen Lewis points out that the issues separating the Surrealism of Bataille's group from that of Breton's came to head at the World's Colonial Exhibition of 1931, an exhibition that celebrated the supposed superiority of the world's colonial powers and their assimilation/appropriation of the colonies' cultural artifacts. Bataille's group protested that North African religious relics, ceremonial masks of Oceania, sculpture from Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and Senegal, (all "tribal" objects,) were put on display in a

way that resembled Dahlem's great ethnographic museum. Displayed in this fashion, the entire collection of ethnographic objects were converted into a homogeneous other, an "other" that stood in contrast to the norm of European culture, created in conscious opposition to the *Wunderkammern* of an earlier age. The display represented a determined attempt to move beyond curiosity and toward an empirically-based science of human culture and history, thus, it should have been highly unappealing to Surrealists – but there were some Surrealists who succumbed to the lure of the other, to the spell of "tribal" culture and "primitive" objects, to the "Mysterious East" or "Primitive Africa," as Utopias. Louis Aragon, Georges Sadoul, and Pierre Unik were not among them. In response to the World Colonial Exposition, the band of dissident Surrealists published a pamphlet, "Don't Visit the Colonial Exposition," and condemned what they referred to as "colonialist banditry" and the heroization of an imperialist "Greater France." Buñuel conveyed this – how the World Colonial Exhibition (and its Surrealist supporters) consigned the other, an *exoticized* other, to a degraded condition – 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.

In this protest against the Colonial Exhibition, the dissident Surrealists were really more consistent with Surrealism's guiding principles than Breton's camp.

But the most profound level 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 was in their allegation that a certain template dominated Breton's way of thinking. They recognized the enormous irony in Breton's thinking, for the pattern they claimed dominated Breton's thinking was the dialectic. The dialectic had been used by Hegel to demonstrate the identity of the real and the rational. The claim that the real is rational is hardly something one would expect the Surrealists to sympathize with; the dissident Surrealists recognized the remarkable tenacity of dialectical thinking, which had lead their erstwhile colleagues into an enthusiasm for the World Colonial Exhibition. They explained thus the role the dialectic had in forming the enthusiasm: 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, according to this conception, even though one term dominates (politically) while the other is dominated, (the Master/Slave relation is exemplary in this regard,) the two terms must have a type of metaphysical equality allowing them to enter into a relation with each other (*e.g.*, allowing 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 and then reduced again to a subordinate status. The Christian conviction that the lowly shall be raised up and the mighty cast down adheres to the master/slave relation. The slave, at first in a lowly position, 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, the colonizer is cast down into the position of the collector of exotic artifacts, whose origin lie in experiences to which the colonizer is not privy.

Bataille understood that dialectical relations are responsible for producing hierarchies. His antipathy against hierarchies reveals itself in his philosophical anthropology of "The Mouth." Bataille points out that with the creation of four-legged 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 hierarchy could be established amongst the organs. As the mouth lost its priority, all organs became equally base. Bataille opposed dialectical thinking partly because it is the mechanism primarily responsible for producing hierarchies, and hierarchies are based on the assumption that hierarchically ranked elements have common features that determine how they can be ordered. In this respect, dialectical thinking fails to appreciate the radical heterogeneity of things. Bataille's critique against the dialectic rebukes its 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. The anthropogenetic role of otherness likewise inspires a scientific heterology.

Humans and animals are locked in a heterological relation, utterly different from one another, yet co-dependent. By contrast, consider how *Las Hurdes* compares humans to animals: the film positions its spectators to feel that Hurdanos are utterly different from them, since they (the people of Las Hurdes) are so animal-like. And yet, all humans are animal in the inner recesses of their being. These are the antithetical propositions that the film sets forth – sets forth and does not reconcile.

Bataille claimed that heterological thinking had a grand role to play in history. The purpose of heterological thought was, above all else, to lay philosophical system building to ruins.

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.

The anthropologist/philosophers who had studied the people of Las Hurdes before Buñuel, José G. Castro and Miguel de Unamuno, had practiced a dialectical anthropology. They saw Hurdanos as a dialectical other existing in the heart of Spain and, for good or ill, having a role in establishing Spain's character. Castro and Unamuno attempted, in the fashion of dialectical anthropology, to show how Las Hurdes can be reconciled with (read, "homogenized with") the rest of Spain. In fact, the history of the anthropological investigation of the people of Las Hurdes alternated between according them a privileged status and then disparaging them. As so often happens in dialectical schemes, the relation between the antithetical terms turned like a whirly-gig: Hurdanos

were sometimes presented as noble and sometimes as degraded; sometimes as a paradigm of Spanish identity and sometimes as an infectious toxin on the Spanish body; sometimes as a lofty factor that elevated Spain and distinguished from the common run of European humanity, and sometimes as idiots whose existence was near to that of animals. Against dialectical anthropology, Buñuel created a film that does not offer “any homogeneous representation of the world.” The Hurdanos simply defied understanding.

At points in the film, the narrator implies the Hurdanos’ heterogeneous status by pointing out Spain’s efforts to assimilate the people of Las Hurdes so that they become homogeneous with the rest of Spain/Europe. We hear that “these bare-footed urchins receive exactly the same education as children all over the world,” and that “these children are famished, but they are taught the sum of the angles of a triangle equal two right angles.” The narrator sees a picture of a very well-dressed aristocratic woman in the wretchedly impoverished classroom and is dumbfounded. “Why is this absurd picture here?” he asks. The most brutally excoriating of all the remarks in the film may be that “even these children are taught the golden rule.”

Not only is *Las Hurdes* a heterological study of the Hurdano, it is also composed of heterological elements. It is composed of elements that refuse to be reduced to homogeneity; its elements are not 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 topics of ethnographic investigation. It includes 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 a consistent analysis of Hurdano life, or even into a comprehensive and internally-consistent commentary on the character of their life. A good example of this is the extraordinary sequence presenting a textbook analysis of mosquitoes. Its discursive nature, similar to that of classroom instructional movies, seems quite different from the travelogue scenes that make up the rest of the film. This sequence seems to break with the rest of the film, at least until one realizes that other sections of the film are not compellingly integrated with one another. Ultimately, the film is a collection of disparate scenes related in a manner that resembles the extremely permeable links that join of elements impressionistic documentary; actually, the elements are more than diverse one from another than those of an impressionistic documentary.

The strongest evidence of the heterogeneity of the film's elements can found in the disparity between sound and image. We are told that Hurdanos keep no domesticated animals and eat only potatoes; nonetheless we see pigs in the street. We are told that Las Hurdes is a "Land without Bread." To emphasize the rarity of bread we are told the parents would steal the bread the schoolmaster gives to the children, and that people make a long trek to Salamanca and return with bread. Yet in the film we see children eating bread. Image and sound have a heterogeneous relation. The different elements of the film (including sound and image) do not cohere.

All in all, the presentation refuses to consolidate itself in a single, fixed viewpoint

on Hurdanos and their life, much less a balanced, objective one. We are presented with an array of information and misinformation, fact, fiction and confabulation. We are presented with irreconcilable statements and depictions of Hurdanos, many of which cast doubt upon others. In this way, *Las Hurdes* repudiates the claim of authoritative representation, a claim the documentary film generally makes.

The heterogeneity of the film's elements mirrors the filmmakers' inability to consolidate their experience into an overarching view of Hurdano life. The Hurdano remain ineluctably other. As Lastra points out, *Las Hurdes* contains a terrible variant of the initiatory scene, a scene that most ethnographic films include, typically, to show that "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 ethnographic investigators/filmmakers stumbling onto a ceremony, which, far from forging links between investigator and subject, further distances them. The scene depicts the recent bridegrooms of La Alberca riding past roosters hanging by their feet at full gallop, and tearing the roosters' heads off. After their contest, in what might be considered a bizarre parody of the sacrament of communion, the bridegrooms get drunk on wine. 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 interpreting the scene as a gloss on sexual politics). Nonetheless they skirt a 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, as the visitor comes to recognise that ethnographic subject and chronicler share a common humanity. Buñuel wanted to avoid exactly that – he wanted to figure the other as an Other and to maintain otherness as a terrifying, abject and sacred phenomenon. Buñuel's transformation of the typical ethnographic film's initiatory scene highlights *Las Hurdes*' character as a heterological document.

That *Las Hurdes* is supposed to be a land without bread also suggests that the region's difference is extreme. A consequence of such a deep and thoroughgoing abjection is that it cannot have any important similarities to our own existence – the lack is just too great a deprivation. The lack of collectible items in the region, whether songs, dances, folklore or costumes also reinforces the Hurdanos' abjection. Their abjection insures their otherness, for it thwarts the mechanism by which we might reduce the Hurdano to sameness. Travelogues generally present exotic locations as a paradise onto which we can project our fantasies. Buñuel's film avoids that approach. As a heterological text, it eschews mechanisms that suggest there is a common identity between the objects of our desires and the actual reality depicted. In its place Buñuel substitutes a more radical, heterological strategy. As Buñuel/the narrator observes Hurdanos and sees what we might expect him to interpret as signs of the same, he reads as signs of difference. When he sees a baby decorated with Christian pendants, we expect him to recognize that Hurdanos share a religious background with the rest of Spain. This is not what he does. Instead, he describes the pendants as further evidence

of Hurdano otherness; the pendants, the narrator states, can be compared only “with those worn by the barbaric tribes of Africa and Oceania.”

The filmmakers’ encounter with the baby dressed in Christian pendants has another significance. A subtext of the film concerns the Hurdano people’s background. Though it is not stated in the narration, Spanish ethnography of the time indicated that the Hurdanos were remnants of a Jewish community. Viewers who know this may see in Hurdano faces features they might interpret as signs of a Sephardic heritage. Their origin inflects how we read their status. We know their condition is one of a thoroughgoing abjectness. At the time (not long before the beginning of the Spanish Civil War), European Jews 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 these Jewish offspring. In a heterological text such as this, the abject, downtrodden existence of these descendants of Sephardic Jews imbues them with the character of the sacred.

Likewise, their Jewishness makes their decoration of their tiny children with Christian pendants that much more like the appropriative activities of the “barbaric tribes of Africa and Oceania.” Extreme difference, as great as that of “the barbaric tribes of Africa and Oceania” mark the Hurdanos, for like those barbaric tribes, they use the Christian religious objects either as charms or as mere decoration. Hurdanos are outsiders to mainstream culture, but despite their difference they have adopted the symbols of the culture in which they live – adopted and transformed the

symbols, for they no longer possess the same meaning when appropriated by Hurdano culture. Difference can never be obliterated by the forces of homogenization; alterity remains a permanent feature of human existence.

- . Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington. (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1968), p. 30.
- . Georges Bataille, "The 'Old Mole' and the Prefix *Sur* in the Words *Surhomme* (*Superman*) and *Surrealist*," in Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939*. Translated and edited by Allan Stoekl. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 40, and "The Lugubrious Game," in *ibid.*, p. 24.
- . André Breton, "Second Manifesto of Surrealism," in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. Translated by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), p. 187.
- . Breton, *Manifestoes*, p. 124.
- . Breton, *Manifestoes*, p. 14. Breton famously stated, "I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*, if one may so speak."
- . Bataille, "The 'Old Mole' and the Prefix *Sur*," in *Visions*, p. 42.
- . Of course, that is not the real reason he refuses (indeed we are not required to believe that the situation depicted is real), but that is the first conclusion to which most would leap.
- . Bataille, *Visions*, p. 94.
- . Bataille shared this interest with Michel Leiris, a writer affiliated with the Surrealist movement until the schisms of 1929, when he became part of the group of dissident Surrealists who centered around Bataille and *Documents*. Leiris was a co-editor, with Bataille, of the review, and a regular contributor. Later, Leiris, along with Bataille and others, formed the College of Sociology (1937-39), the goal of which was to study forms of the sacred in everyday life. They understood that this study would counter the effects of the Enlightenment and capitalist rationalization of the world. Leiris continued to associate with Bataille until the latter's death in 1962.
- . Georges Bataille, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," in *Visions of Excess*, p. 225.
- 11. James F. Lastra "Why is this absurd picture here? Ethnology/equivocation/Buñuel" in *October* No.89 (Summer 1999), 51-68; the passage cited appears on p. 52.
- . Georges Bataille, "The Use Value of D.A.F. De Sade," in *Visions of Excess*, p. 97.
- . Dennis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), xii.
- . Georges Bataille, *Lascaux or the Birth of Art*. (Geneva: Skira, 1955), p. 116.
- . André Bazin and Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, "Entretien avec Luis Buñuel," in *Cahiers du Cinéma* No.36 (June 1954), p. 2-14; the passage cited appears on p. 4. Translation mine.
- . Francisco Aranda, *Luis Buñuel: A Critical Biography*, (London: Secker and Warburg, 1975), p. 88. Lastra takes this remark to indicate that Buñuel was withdrawing from Surrealism. (Lastra, *October*, p. 54). I disagree, for I consider that the remark conveys that Buñuel moved away from Breton's Surrealism and advanced increasingly towards the Surrealism of the Bataille/Aragon/Sadoul/Unik camp.
- . This group congregated around the lavishly-produced arts review titled *Documents* (1929-30).
- . Bataille, "The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade," in *Visions*, p. 97.
- . To use that phrase from Bataille's "The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade."
- . Insects appear frequently in Buñuel's films, and insects are a paradigmatic instance of

Bataille's heterological.

. And that the sick are given bread soaked in goat milk as a special "treat," to fortify them.

. The narrator describes the rite as "strange and barbaric." Lastra, *October*, p. 60. Lastra meticulously points out differences between the different versions of the sound track.

. Here, as in communion, a symbolic representation of the blood of the sacrificial victim.

. Lastra, *October*, p. 61.

. Lastra asserts that "*Las Hurdes* presumes the possibility of a scientific "human geography" in order to criticize its underlying assumptions, not in order to offer a superior alternative." (Lastra, *October*, p 62.) But Buñuel does offer a superior alternative, viz., a heterological study.