

Panic at the Disco? The Liminal Position in Luis Buñuel's *Simón del desierto*

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Simón del desierto (1965), one of Luis Buñuel's most original Mexican films, is perhaps also one of the most misunderstood. Of the relatively little scholarly work on this film in comparison with certain other Buñuel movies, much has read the ending of the film in the discotheque as an allegorical hell. Through a spatial reading of the film, this article shows this to be an erroneous view. The concept of liminality — the state of being between definitive spatial referents, in limbo — is used to connect the modern discotheque of the film's conclusion to the ancient desert seen in the bulk of the narrative. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theory of smooth/striated space and the originary world within naturalist cinema, elaborated by Deleuze, are here related specifically to the liminal, situating this article within the recent trend towards a greater consideration of space within Buñuel's cinema. In this way, an alternative reading to the traditional allegorical interpretation of Simón's fall from grace is suggested — one which has the desert and the disco as contiguous planes where the protagonist's cycle of repetition is perpetuated into infinity, precluding any attempt to posit a conclusive narrative telos.

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Deterred by Buñuel's fervent opposition to aesthetically pleasing or ostentatious cinematography, scholars have traditionally neglected spatial considerations of the director's films. This view is outlined perhaps most explicitly in his autobiography, where Buñuel states: '[n]unca me ha gustado la belleza cinematográfica prefabricada que, con frecuencia, hace olvidar lo que la película quiere contar y que personalmente no me conmueve' (2001: 210). The proof of such a stance is often given in the form

of Gabriel Figueroa, cinematographer to numerous prolific Mexican directors of the period, and his experiences during the shooting of *Nazarín* (1958).¹ Figueroa says:

He encontrado el truco para trabajar con Luis [...] No hay más que plantar la cámara frente a un paisaje soberbio, con nubes magníficas, flores maravillosas, y cuando estás listo le vuelves la espalda a todas esas bellezas y filmas un camino lleno de pedruscos o una roca pelada. (Quoted in Sánchez Vidal, 1984: 219)

However, recent years are slowly giving rise to a renewed consideration of the *milieux* of Buñuel's characters, and it is proving to be a fruitful line of investigation. Isabel Santaolalla (2004) has revisited *The Young One* (1960), the second of two English language productions by the director, set on a nondescript island in the US Deep South, to examine the spatial dynamics at play in the film. She posits that the island's liminal nature — inextricably linked to, but removed from, the mainland — allows the white male protagonist to establish his own highly questionable patriarchal system, whilst also, ironically, being the site of cultural encounter through the introduction of a black musician fleeing a lynch mob.² Examining the role of the 'ciudad rota' and the 'cuerpo urbano', Julia Tuñón (2003) has written of the city as an extension of the body in *Los olvidados* (1950), which, Tuñón asserts, bears the influence of the director's early Surrealist writings on the decay on the suburbs in its presentation of anthropomorphic disintegration. Both Santaolalla and Tuñón shed new light on two of Buñuel's movies made during his Mexican period through a more concerted focus on space as a symbolic driver, and not merely a passive container, of the narrative. In a different way, considerations of Buñuel's status as a *desterrado* have necessitated a re-evaluation of the complexities of spatial representation in the director's corpus.³ For instance, Marvin D'Lugo (2003) writes that Buñuel's time in Mexico was essentially spent on the margins between his European roots and his Mexican second home, and which yielded work reflective of this. As such, D'Lugo, like Santaolalla and Martín, acknowledges the symbolic currency of islands in the director's Mexican cinema as a possible utopian, malleable space within a New World. Stating the case for a more decisive evaluation of space in the Buñuelian canon most overtly, Tom Conley states that '[o]ver the passage of time it may be that the spatial dynamics of Buñuel's cinema may have gained force where the psycho-analytical or religious material has lost some of its luster' (2008: 45), positing a shift

¹ Patrick Keating (2010) has recently examined Figueroa's work with both Buñuel and Emilio Fernández in an attempt to think through the frames of reference used by the culture and institutions of art cinema with regard to each director's work, namely universal Surrealist and national Mexican frames of reference respectively. Keating's emphasis is on Figueroa as a figure of mediation between the two directors and his reading of their respective films is driven by spatial considerations; that is, the representation of cinematic space and interpretive spaces generated by the viewer necessary to read the cinematic space.

² The similarities to *Robinson Crusoe* (1954), the first of the director's English language films, and the hero's meeting with Friday are unmistakable in this respect. Fernando Gabriel Martín has written of Buñuel's fascination with islands, focusing specifically on *The Young One* and *Robinson Crusoe* (2010: 731–75).

³ Scholarship on Buñuel and exile has increased substantially. One of the most notable contributors to this strand of criticism is Víctor Fuentes. See, for instance, Fuentes (2004) for an auteur biographical examination of Buñuel's exile in his life and works. Marina Pérez de Mendiola proposes that Mexico functioned as palimpsest for the director, with characters regularly uprooted due to 'Buñuel's almost visceral necessity to erase Mexico's specificity' (2006: 29).

in focus from psychoanalytical-theological modes of inquiry in favour of a greater attention to space.

Taking my lead from Conley, my aim here is to carry out a fresh reading of Buñuel's *Simón del desierto* (1965) from a spatial perspective, and to contest established readings of the film that have been recycled by the relatively limited number of scholars who have paid attention to this movie.⁴ To make the final film of his Mexican corpus, Buñuel drew inspiration from the legend of Saint Simeon Stylites, a fifth-century preacher who, in the tradition of the so-called desert fathers, withdrew from the world to live atop a pillar in the Syrian desert from which he would preach to those who made the pilgrimage to see him. Throughout the course of the film, Simón is visited three times by the Devil, played by Silvia Pinal, in various guises — an early twentieth-century schoolgirl uniform, a revealing toga, and even dressed as Christ himself — who attempts to corrupt the ascetic and induct him into the world of secular, carnal pleasure. Eventually she succeeds in wresting the preacher from his pillar and whisking him off across time and space to a 1960s New York after-hours club in an ending which appears jarringly abrupt.⁵ Encouraged by the Devil's promise (or threat) to take him to a place where he will witness 'las heridas rojas de la carne', various critics have interpreted the discotheque as a personal inferno and a place of hedonistic heathenry for the would-be saint.⁶ While this linear interpretation is plausible, it betrays a privileging of the allegorical over the spatial. The reading elaborated throughout this article stands as a point of contention with previous readings of *Simón del desierto* by examining both the desert and the disco from a spatial perspective in order to expose the ambiguity, rather than the supposed certitude, contained within the film's conclusion. In short, I shall show that Simón's ending place of the nightclub is just as much an interstitial location as the immense desert before it. In so doing, my primary framework for analysis derives from the anthropological concept of liminality. Effectively the state of being between two stable reference points in space and/or time — in *limbo* — the liminal is a quality which lends itself specifically to Simón's existence in the middle of the desert. The protagonist is adrift in space with a lack of landmarks — save his pillar, of course — for his

⁴ Besides the sources used in this article, the film has received attention in numerous publications which set out a (brief) reading of Buñuel's entire oeuvre. See, for instance, Durgnat (1970: 136–38), or Bermúdez (2000: 188–91). Among relatively recent publications such as Evans & Santaolalla (2004) and Cavielles García & Poppenberg (2011) that seek to engage with the director's work in new ways, *Simón del desierto* is notably absent, though it does feature in Libby Saxton's (2013) chapter on the depiction of miracles in Buñuel's cinema. Stefan Gross's monograph (1998), in German, stands out as the most detailed scholarly enquiry of the film, detailing the production specifics as well as its reception and connection to Surrealism.

⁵ For financial reasons (namely, the failure of producer Gustavo Alatriste to secure the additional funding necessary to complete the film), the film was cut short and, depending on the version, stands at between 42 and 50 minutes (Baxter, 1994: 273).

⁶ Fuentes claims that Simón's journey to the nightclub represents a '*descensus ad infernos*' (1993: 157). José Agustín Mahieu shares Fuentes' sentiments, stating that the club is a 'probable alegoría del infierno' (1980: 171). Gross attempts to avoid the simplistic, allegorical readings of Fuentes and Agustín Mahieu by suggesting that the bulk of the narrative could represent a dream. Gross nevertheless posits that, in true surrealist fashion, 'society is Hell. Loneliness is Hell. We are Hell. The disco is Hell. The sinners make the music. Hell is other people. The desert is Hell. The disco is the desert' (1998: 265). All translations from sources in languages other than English and Spanish are my own.

orientation. The film's conclusion in the New York nightclub is a radical departure from the liminal desert, yet proves to be no less liminal, as the preacher is destined to remain in what I show to be an interstitial space with no hope of reprieve until the end of time. In this way, Buñuel's narrative telos will be exposed as a paradox which has led various scholars mistakenly to read Simón's rock and roll destination as a modern inferno.

Liminality

The concept of liminality was first introduced by the Belgian anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in 1909 as a theoretical framework to analyse rites of passage and initiation ceremonies common to myriad tribes and cultures. The etymological root of the term comes from the Latin *limen*, or threshold. Van Gennep postulates that passage rituals share a tripartite structure: pre-liminal, where preparations take place for the ritual; liminal, during which the person(s) undergoing a rite of passage are separated from the rest of the tribe; and post-liminal, when a re-aggregation into society occurs (1960: 21). Though primarily concerned with liminality as an element of passage rites, van Gennep nevertheless alludes to its spatial dimension by evoking the so-called neutral zones of Classical Antiquity:

[t]he same system of zones is to be found among the semi-civilised, although here boundaries are less precise because the claimed territories are few in number and sparsely settled. The neutral zones are ordinarily deserts, marshes, and most frequently virgin forests. (1960: 18)

He goes on to explain that, because of the subjective 'pivoting of sacredness', the neutral zone appears sacred to those on either side of it, but to those within the neutral zone, the adjacent territories are sacred. It is the passage from one adjacent territory to the other which gives the subject his or her interstitial position and liminal state; in van Gennep's own words, the subject 'wavers between two worlds' (1960: 18). Fellow anthropologist Victor Turner has elaborated considerably on the potentialities in van Gennep's concept. For Turner, liminality is equated with the temporary suspension of structure, that is, it is essentially an 'interstructural situation' (1967: 93). It is in the interstructural situation, in the interstices, that the all-important transformation associated with the liminal state of the liminar, or subject of the rite, occurs.

Further to van Gennep and Turner's indication of the spatial dimension of liminality, Bjørn Thomassen posits a move away from the field of anthropology, suggesting that the concept can be applied to contemporary spatial discourse: '[l]iminal places can be specific thresholds; they can also be more extended areas, like "borderlands" or, arguably, whole countries' (2009: 16). Thomassen's comments resonate clearly in a modern world where movement outranks stasis and where substantial numbers of asylum seekers, migrants and exiles (Buñuel included) are, and have long been, in flux. Furthermore, Arpad Szakolczai (2000: 207–18) posits that the liminal condition may be a by-product of the (post)modern era, citing the collapse of social structures during periods of ongoing unrest, rendering liminality a useful framework for analysis in relation not only to the sociological and political aspects of such tumultuous

societies, but also their artistic mediums of expression such as cinema.⁷ However, when considering the liminal nature of the supposedly fifth-century desert which acts as a backdrop to the majority of the film, Dag Øistein Endsjø's (2000) work on the eschatia, or geographical periphery, can be of use. According to Endsjø, the eschatia represented a discrete liminal zone in the ancient Greek worldview, located outside the city walls, and he suggests that certain spaces such as these can be seen to possess a more autonomous, inherent liminal quality due to their exclusion from culturally recognized frames (they are, to use Endsjø's term, 'spatial remains' [2000: 357]). Endsjø's view of an intrinsic liminality contrasts with Turner's assumption that interstitial spaces were imbued with a liminal quality due to the ritual taking place there. Notwithstanding the sporadic blessings Simón gives to pilgrims who journey into the desert to see him, rituals are largely absent from the narrative of *Simón del desierto*; Simón, high on his pillar, is alone throughout much of the film, visited occasionally by monks who provide him with material sustenance, pilgrims in search of rapid miracles, and the Devil, intent on Simón's corporeal seduction and spiritual ruin. The desert, therefore, possesses an intrinsic liminality thanks to its essentially formless topography, which finds itself between definitive spatial referents while also acting, as van Gennep says, as a neutral zone between discrete, unseen territories. It is in this transitional zone that Simón chooses to anchor himself.

Simón's desert

As the credits roll during the opening sequence of the film, the viewer is shown a vast desert landscape. The high-angle camera first pans the landscape, picking up nothing more than a handful of cacti before settling on a group of pilgrims and monks chanting a haunting *Te Deum*, trickling through the dunes. The hostile terrain of the desert is immediately highlighted as the pilgrims wind slowly across the sprawling expanse before disappearing behind the cacti. The desert is often seen in Western society as a transcendental space, a void that is impossible to fill, as Claudia Rapp signals: '[t]he desert [...] symbolizes an empty and threatening space, devoid of people and far removed from all the advantages and achievements of human society' (2006: 94). In the same way as the diverse and mutable open landscapes of Buñuel's adoptive homeland were transformed into the island off the US Carolina coast in *The Young One*, or into the jungle of the fictitious Latin American state in *La Mort en ce jardin* (1956), to cite two examples from his Mexican work, here the parched landscape of El Valle del Mezquital, Ixmiquilpan, becomes the fifth-century Syrian desert. Western representations of the desert are frequently imbued with an exotic aesthetic, serving as landscapes of the Other, yet Buñuel's anti-aesthetic ethos makes itself known in the ambiguity, even banality, of the scrubland on screen. In a tradition begun with the filming of *Tierra sin pan* in 1932, Buñuel had once again chosen a

⁷ Hamid Naficy's writing on accented cinema — a cinema of migrants which is affected, or accented, by the filmmaker's spatial dislocation, often through exile — utilizes the concept of liminality to investigate the representation of tropes common to this diverse strand of cinema, such as displacement and border crossings, as well as the interstitial modes of production of such films. In the context of diasporic cinema, Naficy considers airports and seaports to be liminal spaces of transition (2001: 243–48).

liminal location, a space on the margins, as it were, inhospitable and industrially underdeveloped.⁸

If the topography of Simón's scrubland is indicative of the ascetic's horizontal liminality, the pillar on which he stands serves to suspend him in a vertical interstitial position, too. For Durgnat, Simón, 'lost in the wild blue yonder', is the embodiment of 'the first astronaut, alone on a Space Platform' (1970: 138). The opening scenes of the film show Simón relocating from his modest pillar to a gigantic, profoundly phallic column which, we are told, has been specially constructed for him by a pious benefactor. Gleaning the irony in the preacher's promotion, Michael Wood suggests that 'even in the realm of renunciation there are opportunities for professional advancement' (2009). Wood is also one of the few critics to remark upon a further Buñuelian sardonic irony: Simón's 'promotion' occurs after he has been on his first pillar for precisely six years, six months, and six days — the number of the Beast in the Book of Revelations, an ominous coincidence which undoubtedly heralds the later appearances of the Devil. His change of pillar is indicative of the protagonist's desire to distance himself from earthly concerns through an increased propinquity to God, albeit by a mere several metres. The short sequence as Simón walks from one pillar to the other will be the only incidence of the desert father's feet on *terra firma*. Abjuring all things earthly in his quest for seraphic benediction leads him to reject even his own mother, a possible incarnation of the long-suffering Virgin as she camps out at the foot of her son's pillar in the hope of his affection. In his deliberate positioning of himself between the celestial and the terrestrial, Simón's liminal location is twofold, in a so-called neutral zone and between two supposedly opposing planes. The cinematography, provided by Buñuel's long-time collaborator Gabriel Figueroa, is also key in perpetuating and giving visible representation to Simón's liminal location. Myriad high-angle shots depict the solitary figure of Simón against the vast expanse of sky, in addition to distance shots which frame him and his column against the endless desert. Shots such as the high-angle, low-angle reverse shot during Simón's conversations with his regular visitors (the monks, the dwarf goatherd, and the Devil), as Catherine Dey indicates, are also utilized to exaggerate the physical and emotional detachment of Simón from his contemporaries (2000: 239).

Within the vast scrubland, the only definitive landmark, it would seem, is Simón's pillar — ironically, all roads lead to the indefinite liminar. Perhaps the most significant indication the viewer obtains of the ascetic's liminal position is through his three encounters with the Devil. Pinal's voice is heard from off-screen before we see her appear for the first time from behind Simón's former column, clad in a schoolgirl's outfit and rolling a hoop. Durgnat reads the hoop as a symbol of eternity, without beginning or end (1970: 138), and such an observation is fitting to the reading set out in this article: the hoop is a visual metaphor for the indefinite interstitial position of the protagonist as well as an allusion to the cyclical nature of the diegetic world, an idea I will come to in due course. As the Devil-schoolgirl finishes her ditty about

⁸ Felix Martialay makes the connection between the landscape of *Simón del desierto* and that of *Tierra sin pan*: '[u]n desierto [...] Un paisaje-personaje en muchos films de Buñuel, como si la calcinación de las Hurdes se hubiera condicionado ese "ser" miserable, reseco, inhóspito, que se funde con la miseria itinerante de Nazarín, o la enteca figura del enano buñueliano tan frecuente en su cine' (1969: 8).

Simón's supposed penchant for scrubbing his teeth with Syrian urine, the two engage in an ostensibly banal conversation:

Simón: *¿Qué vienes a hacer aquí?*

Niña: *A jugar.*

Simón: *¿De dónde vienes?*

Niña: *De allí.*

Simón: *¿Y adónde vas?*

Niña: *Allá.*

This is the first instance of what will become a multitude of essentially meaningless adverbial locutions of place peppered throughout the narrative. Though the answers the Devil gives to Simón may appear glib, they confirm our initial observations of the space in which Simón dwells: it is betwixt and between indefinite spatial referents and unseen space, in the middle of here and there. And it is not only the Devil who is prone to providing such indefinite expressions of place; Simón, during the course of his satanic ordeals, displays a notable fondness for the exclamation '*vade retro, satanas!*'. Unfortunately for the ascetic, the Devil's continued presence punctuated throughout the film suggests that there is no backwards or forwards in a world which is so uniformly bleak it is almost oneiric. Indeed, the Devil's retort to Simón during her third and final appearance before the pair are pictured in the nightclub should be noted: as an increasingly weary Simón issues a feeble '*vade retro*', the Devil asserts '*ni vade, ni retro, ni nada!*'.

The desert as smooth space

Helpful to this exploration of the spatial liminal is Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of smooth and striated space. This supposed binary pair is elaborated via a number of models to provide analogies to what is a rather abstract concept. Smooth space, the antithesis of striated space, is one in which 'the points are subordinate to the trajectory' as opposed to the traveller's movements through striated space in which 'lines or trajectories tend to be subordinated to points: one goes from one point to the other' (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004: 474). As such, the distinction between the two is visible in the randomly arranged fibres of felt and the striated form of imbricated woven fabric in a so-called technical model, or the contrast between the smooth vector and the striated point in the navigation of the seas (or the desert) in a maritime model. The spatial paradigm of striated-smooth, then, can have its counterpart in a sedentary-nomadic binary. Deleuze and Guattari posit that '[i]n striated space, one closes off a surface and "allocates" it according to determinate intervals, assigned breaks; in the smooth, one "distributes" oneself in an open space, according to frequencies and in the course of one's crossings' (2004: 481), which goes some way to explaining why smooth space is a space of 'affects, not belongings, haptic, not optic' (2004: 479). Fittingly, Deleuze and Guattari assert that the ocean, steppe, and desert belong to this category of space as their topography invites a nomadic way of life and sensory negotiation. On the other hand, the archetypal striated space is the city, highly regimented and grid-like, its verticality to be negotiated optically. Despite his rigid degree of fixity to his column, Simón is patently a Buñuelian (and a Deleuzian)

nomad, as '[w]e can say of the nomads, following Toynbee's suggestion: *they do not move*. They are nomads by dint of not moving, not migrating, of holding a smooth space that they refuse to leave' (2004: 482).

In his self-imposed liminal state, then, Simón is holding his nomadic smooth space, not moving from point to point but existing permanently in the trajectory, in the vain hope of a spiritual epiphany. Deleuze and Guattari point out that '[t]o think is to voyage' (2004: 482), and in his thoughts Simón is perpetually waiting for a metaphysical manifestation, 'waver[ing] between two worlds' (van Gennep, 1960: 18). Furthermore, a key aspect of the traversing of smooth space, and one that provides a link with the concept of liminality as proposed by Turner, is the degree of 'becoming', to use Deleuze and Guattari's expression, that this act entails: '[v]oyaging smoothly is a becoming, and a difficult, uncertain becoming at that' (2004: 482). For Turner, the liminal state is 'transition [. . .], a becoming, and in the case of *rites de passage*, even a transformation' (1967: 94). Thus, any physical, psychical, or ethical metamorphosis should occur in liminal — in this sense, one could perhaps also read smooth — space. Although Simón's desert home is certainly a liminal zone, the transformative element inherent in such a spatio-temporal area is forever occluded through the protagonist's refusal to acknowledge his innate connection to the earth plane.⁹ Simón, therefore, is forever stuck in a potential becoming not yet begun.

Despite its apparent rigidity, however, the smooth-striated space pair does not in practice function within a dichotomy; its nature is fundamentally cyclical and dialectic, as Deleuze and Guattari make clear:

[s]mooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into a striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space. In the first case, one organizes even the desert; in the second, the desert gains and grows; and the two can happen simultaneously. (2004: 474–75)

For instance, just as the city is the archetypal striated space, so the sea is the smooth equivalent. Even so, Deleuze and Guattari assert that the oceans were the first to be subjected to the desires of Western civilization for striation, with the latitudinal/longitudinal grid being superimposed on the seas to aid navigation (2004: 479). Acknowledging the dialectic inherent in the smooth-striated pair, Laura Marks writes: 'the more we examine the relationships between the smooth and the striated in desert space, and the relations of life and death that their movement describes, the more difficult it is to distinguish them' (2006: 126).

For Marks, writing about the desert as the chief arena of nomadism in Arab cinema, desert space is contested space, at once smooth and striated, as '[a] true cinema of the desert sees the desert in relation to the outside forces that shape it' (2006: 126). Marks cites the example of early systems of commerce between the nomadic Bedouin tribes people and the sedentary population as an instance of the reciprocity between smooth and striating forces played out in the desert. This is not the case in *Simón del desierto*. Notwithstanding the obvious differences between the contemporary Arab

⁹ Simón's refusal to recognize and give countenance to the Other forms the backbone of many readings of the film. Dey, for example, argues that Simón's disavowal of his ethical obligation to approach others in order to bring himself closer to the deity he serves is his ultimate downfall (2000: 238–45).

road movie and Buñuel's depiction of what is supposedly the fifth-century Syrian desert, in Buñuel's film the outside forces which shape such space remain unseen: the viewer never sees the monastery, home to the monks who provide Simón with food and water, nor the town from which the pilgrims journey to witness his miracles. The smooth-striated-smooth cog appears to have ground to a halt in *Simón del desierto*, never rotating beyond smooth, at least for the protagonist. This interruption in the system is what permits the spatial-smooth to transpose itself onto the ontological-smooth, as it were; the ascetic's spatial liminality has become to a large extent his mental detachment. It is certainly not impossible to live striated on the dunes, just as it is equally feasible to occupy a smooth space in the most striated of spaces — the city — though this is not the case for Simón. He is a nomad, an occupant of smooth space, by dint, as explained above, of not moving.

The desert as Deleuzian originary world

The smooth and the liminal can in turn be related to Deleuze's exposition of the originary world in film. In *Cinema 1*, Deleuze focuses his attention on the movement-image. He argues that the cinematographic medium provides us not with 'an image to which movement is added, it immediately gives us a movement-image' (1992: 2). Cinema is in a unique position to show the continuity of movement, and 'the essence of the cinematographic movement-image lies in extracting from vehicles or moving bodies the movement which is their common substance, or extracting from movements the mobility which is their essence' (Deleuze, 1992: 23). The term movement-image does not denote a singular image; it is an umbrella term that Deleuze uses to encompass the specific varieties of movement-images he goes on to identify in cinema, one of which is the impulse-image. This type of image is located between two major components in the taxonomy of cinema, according to Deleuze: the affection-image and the action-image. The affection-image, Deleuze writes, is often represented by a close-up shot of the face, while the realism of the action-image is most often depicted by the medium-shot. As Conley explains: '[a]ffective images are found in *lieux quelconques* or "any-places-whatsoever," and they are charged with emotion while action is given to "determinate milieus" and "behaviors" appropriate to them' (2008: 46).

The affection-image works to 'abstract [the object of the close-up shot] from all spatio-temporal co-ordinates' (Deleuze, 1992: 96) within an any-space-whatever, a particular space which appears fragmented and lacking in homogeneity. Simón's desert is quite clearly not an any-space-whatever, resisting fragmentation through its bleak uniformity. The action-image, however, 'is the domain of realism, of qualities and powers actualized in a concrete, specific space-time' (Bogue, 2003: 85), the model on which the hegemony of US narrative cinema is based. There is a preponderance of distance and low- and high-angle shots in *Simón del desierto*, which depict neither the affection- nor the action-image: just as the preacher's perpetual existence atop the pillar is related to his surrounding environment cinematographically, rather than being abstracted from this as in the affection-image, so his surrounding environment, through its incessant uniformity and unspecified location, cannot be considered a concrete, specific space-time, as in the realist action-image. Before the derived *milieux*

begin to assert their independence to become the arenas of action in which '[a]ffects and impulses now only appear as embodied in behaviour, in the forms of emotions or passions which order and disorder it' (Deleuze, 1992: 141), they are the locus of a 'degenerate affect' or an 'embryonic action' (Deleuze, 1992: 123) contained within an impulse.

As opposed to the action-image, then, which is a marker of realism, the impulse-image has its roots in naturalism, an aesthetic mode which, according to Deleuze, 'is not opposed to realism, but on the contrary accentuates its features by extending them in an idiosyncratic surrealism' (1992: 124). Inherent to this naturalistic cinema, and underscoring in a subliminal vein the more realist geographical and historical *milieux* within the diegesis, is the originary world, a place regulated by base drives. About this world Deleuze writes (and he is worth quoting at length):

[t]he originary world may be marked by the artificiality of the set (a comic opera kingdom, a studio forest, or marsh) as much as by the authenticity of a preserved zone (a genuine desert, a virgin forest). It is recognisable by its *formless character*. It is pure background, or rather, a *without-background*, composed of *uniform matter*, sketches or fragments, crossed by non-formal functions, acts, or energy dynamisms which do not refer to the constituted subjects. Here the characters are like animals: the fashionable gentleman a bird of prey, the lover a goat, the poor man a hyena. This is not because they have their form or behaviour, but because their acts are prior to all differentiation between the human and the animal. These are human animals. And this is indeed the impulse: the energy which seizes fragments in the originary world. (1992: 123–24) [emphasis is my own]

Deleuze goes on to categorize both the studio jungle of Buñuel's Franco-Mexican co-production *La Mort en ce jardin* and Simón's desert as originary worlds (1992: 125). In this way, the originary world bears the hallmark of smooth space, which is essentially 'amorphous', and with 'no background, plane, or contour' (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004: 477, 496). Indeed, it is not difficult to see how the arid plains of Simón's desert can be considered formless in appearance. As regards the functioning of the originary world, Paul Sandro explains that these worlds extract impulses from modes of behaviour in the determinate *milieux* and give rise to the fetish object, simultaneously present in the real *milieu* and originary world which underlies it (2003: 37). Such is often the case in Buñuel's cinema; we need only think of the skipping rope in *Viridiana* (1961), the leather boots of the maid in *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre* (1964), the animated postcard, the re-animated snake, and the entire aeroplane wreck in *La Mort en ce jardin*, or the fixation of the dwarf goatherd on his goat's udders in *Simón del desierto*, to list but a few.

Two of the primary proponents of naturalist cinema according to Deleuze are Buñuel and Stroheim. Sandro maintains that 'Buñuel, like Zola, subjects his characters mercilessly to the pressures and demands of their social settings, their *milieux*' (2003: 36). Simón is indeed at the mercy of his self-imposed exile in the desert. As Deleuze explains, '[t]he originary world is [...] both radical beginning and absolute end', both of which are linked by what Deleuze terms 'a line of the steepest slope' (1992: 124). The slope acts as a bridge between the real *milieux* and the originary world, underscoring it and encouraging an entropic degradation throughout the

narrative, 'a cruel passage from primal origin to ultimate destruction' (Bogue, 2003: 83). The line of steepest slope is therefore inextricably linked to chronology, as 'it has the merit of causing an originary image of time to rise, with the beginning, the end, and the slope' (Deleuze, 1992: 124). Indeed, it is fitting to recall that the bestial impulses of the originary world are said by Deleuze to coalesce in what is the ultimate degradation: 'a great death-impulse' (1992: 124). The relevance of this slope of degradation to *Simón del desierto* underscores the allegorical readings of this film; that is, that Simón ends up in the hellish disco. Deleuze contradicts this common reading. Buñuel's, he says, is a particular brand of naturalism; his line of steepest slope is not actually a slope at all. The radical beginning in *Simón del desierto* occurs at the end of the narrative: the incredible conclusion suggests a perpetuation of the protagonist's self-imposed exile, albeit in the Big Apple of the swinging sixties. The point is, as Deleuze signals, that unlike that of Stroheim, Buñuel's naturalist cinema operates cyclically, as 'in Buñuel [...], entropy was replaced by the cycle or the eternal return' (1992: 131), in which the saintly and the malicious find themselves indiscriminately. It is this trope of repetition which brings us back to the liminal. Thomassen points out that, as an interstructural situation, the practices established during periods of liminality are incorporated into the redefined structure of society when the liminal period comes to an end (2009: 20). The cycle then goes on to repeat itself. In *Simón del desierto*, however, Buñuel's penchant for an open, ambiguous ending eschews the re-imposition of structure which would appear to be equated with an unambiguous teleological narrative, instead preferring to continue his repetition in the originary world/liminal space. There is more to be said regarding this point, and I shall return to it in light of the film's conclusion with respect to narrative teleology.

From desert to disco

The Devil's third and final appearance heralds the protagonist's spatial dislocation as he is transported through time and space to end up in a nondescript discotheque in modern New York City. A medium close-up tracking shot of a coffin, apparently self-propelled through the desert scrubland, suggests that Simón's adversary has returned as promised. The weary protagonist clearly knows what the ominous object contains, crossing himself and asking the Lord for succour. The coffin lid opens and out steps the Devil, this time clad in a revealing toga. The ascetic's Hail Marys are of no use to him now, she warns, and instructs him to prepare himself for a long voyage, the destination of which will be a place where he will witness 'las heridas rojas de la carne'. As stated at the beginning of this article, this description has undoubtedly given rise to many of the critics' allegorical readings of the nightclub at the end of the film as a postmodern hell, a reading to which I will propose an alternative.¹⁰ The Devil's comment 'vienen a buscarnos' is Buñuel's cue to cut to a low-angle shot of an aeroplane traversing the sky above what is supposedly the desert

¹⁰ In addition to this aural allusion to a hellish space, the name of the band playing in the nightclub is *The Simmers*, while the shooting script of the film suggests that anyone viewing the scene for the first time 'se creería juguete de una pesadilla' (Buñuel & Alejandro, 1964: 75).

of fifth-century Syria; the oneiric dimension is never more apparent than in the leap from Late Antiquity to modernity as the following sequence shows Simón's empty pillar dissolve into the pulsating megalopolis of New York.

The footage of the city opens with disorientating aerial shots of the cosmopolitan centre before the camera moves to street-level to frame the high-rise blocks, read by Durgnat (1970: 138) as a multitude of modern columns. The camera then pans the interior of a nondescript nightclub, passing over a writhing corporeal sea before settling on Simón and the Devil, both of whom are dressed fittingly in more modern attire.¹¹ Contemporary or not, however, what is important here is that he remains a Deleuzian nomad. There is once again a brief but telling exchange between the Devil and the ascetic. Responding to his decidedly languid '*vade retro*', Pinal delivers with gusto one of the most revealing lines in the film: '*vade ultra*'. With this rebuttal resonating, the viewer realizes that, while the (post)modern *ultra* may have triumphed over the archaic *retro*, the rules of the game remain the same: the continuation of ambiguity surrounding spatial referents confirms that the striated space *par excellence*, the city, is ultimately a smooth, postmodern desert, and the decadent nightclub is anything but an oasis of tranquillity. Thus, Buñuel appears to anticipate the view of cultural theorists such as Szokolczai; namely, as I mentioned previously, that modernity has become equated with a perpetual liminality.¹²

Also apparent is that behind — or rather beneath — the discotheque's bizarre, but ultimately real, façade of hedonistic rock and roll lies an originary world as liminal as that of the desert. This time underscoring a geographical *milieu* of self-indulgence in the twentieth century, this originary world is both radical beginning and absolute end. Simón cannot leave to go 'home' as another lost ascetic has begun his own tenancy in the desert, and the Devil informs him that he will have to stay '*para siempre*'. Conley's observation that, '[f]or the director the originary world carries the bonus of being a site for caustic reflection that goes well beyond the time and space in which it is placed' (2008: 47), can point in this respect to the transcendental, limitless quality of the realistic *milieu* of the nightclub. Furthermore, the frenetic floundering of the partygoers' limbs is a dance aptly titled *carne radioactiva* and is '*el último baile, el baile final*', the absolute end to Simón's radical starting point of forever. The dancers' gestures and actions are described as

inquietantes, los gestos a veces graciosos, a veces obscenos, las contorsiones, las actitudes y el caminar imitando a monos, perros, gallinas, etc. . . todo ello, contribuyendo a formar una alegoría inquietante de nuestra época

before the script calls for shots of such eclectic dance-styles as 'chicken back', 'cheetah the monkey' and 'watusi' (Buñuel & Alejandro, 1964: 75). The originary world, as Deleuze states, is prior to any division between human and beast. Here, then, the

¹¹ Interestingly, in the screenplay Simón is described as resembling the Beatles (Buñuel & Alejandro, 1964: 76).

¹² Besides the collapse of social structures, a further necessary ingredient in permanent liminality is the absence of what Turner names 'masters of ceremonies', the 'guardians' (to borrow Szokolczai's term) who ensure a safe passage through the liminal period and the suspension of structure (Szokolczai, 2000: 215–26). The modern Simón is misled by the trickster figure of the Devil, being brought not to a re-aggregation into society, but forced to exist in the daunting, disorientating urban jungle of 1960s New York among a mass of bodies to which the individual must capitulate.

originary world of the desert is conflated with that of the disco. They are contiguous planes of formless character underscoring the realist *milieux* in which human actions resemble bestial movements. In this way, in spite of 'las heridas rojas de la carne', the nightclub is much less an allegorical hell than it is an interstitial, uncertain purgatory; to read it as the former is to over-simplify its connection to the originary world of the desert and to impose a neat, teleological discourse on what is, in fact, an ambiguous conclusion.

Liminal teleologies: starting from zero

Thus, the viewer has come full circle: from dubiety in the desert to dislocation in the disco. The ending of the film is deeply ambiguous on a psychological and spatial level. Simón *appears* to have left behind his 'in-between' location in the desert — for better or worse — thanks to an ostensible narrative *telos*: his weakened spiritual resolve means he is transported to an apparent hell. Positing a teleology in this and other of Buñuel's works certainly facilitates an ethical or thematic reading of his films. According to Cristiana Malaguti, although Buñuel's characters appear to operate from a self-determinist perspective, 'in Buñuel the dynamism around the text always unfolds in a teleological manner' (1993: 25). However, Buñuel's own teleology often functions to *negate* any notion of design, at least any design which is neat in its conclusion, through what Deleuze has termed 'the cycle, or endless return' (1992: 131). To this end, Malaguti notes that even in the most open-ended of his films there is not a trace of certainty or of redemption (1993: 26). In addition to the film discussed here, one could think of the ending of *Le Charme discret de la bourgeoisie* (1972), where the characters tirelessly continue their perpetual walk through a nondescript countryside space. As the liminal period draws to a close, so does the degree of ambiguity and uncertainty it represents: '[in the third state, or re-aggregation] the ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations of a clearly defined and "structural" type' (Turner, 1967: 94). This is exactly the conclusion of certitude denied by Buñuel's narrative *telos* in *Simón del desierto*: as the Devil informs him, he is merely to remain in the nightclub forever.

I have said that Buñuel's narratives are constructed cyclically, a fact which does not escape Malaguti as she echoes Deleuze's comments on this point: '[i]n Buñuel time assumes the mythical dimension of the eternal return, the predominant rhetorical figure is that of *repetition*' (1993: 25). In addition to the liminal qualities within such repetition, Malaguti continues:

we have a resetting [*azzeramento*] of narrative time, especially in the presentation of the characters themselves, who usually lack any historical roots or any referent outside of the economy of Buñuelian discourse; in general this concerns orphans [...], or individuals who interpose a rift between present and past, and between present and future. (1993: 25)

The resetting of time is clearly pertinent to *Simón del desierto* as the ascetic finds himself permanently on the limen between present and future.¹³ Within the desert, it

¹³ Interestingly, Carlos Barbáchano (2000: 201) believes the narrative of *Simón del desierto* to be atemporal. Buñuel's comments regarding the narrative setting of the film lend weight to this observation: 'no me interesaba dar un tiempo definido en la historia' (Colina & Pérez Turrent, 1993: 140).

seems, both the temporal and spatial dimensions shift from their objectivist matrix to become anchored in subjectivity. Simón also lacks any historical anchor within the diegesis. This is what permits his transportation from desert to discotheque, from one originary world to another. This is Deleuze's cycle of return in action, a constant intrusion of liminality in the spatio-temporal aspect of the narrative.

Conclusion: a lack of place

Writing about *Simón del desierto*, Annie Goldmann asserts that the film's primary thematic is a comment on the lack of *place* for a man such as Simón: '[i]n its admirable simplicity this film poses the difficult question of the place of the believer in the modern world' (1969: 465). Again linking with Szokolczai's view of modernity as perpetual liminality, hers seems to be a nihilistic reading of the film, suggesting that in the twentieth century there is neither God nor Devil, and Simón has no reason to exist (1969: 464). In this regard, Buñuel certainly appears to be commenting on a lack of place in the modern world, not only for believers, but for everyone. This, then, is where a spatial reading of the film is revealing: *place* is at the core of this film, conspicuous by its absence. As I have shown, Simón is trapped, physically and mentally, in *limbo*. The desert and the discotheque are both betwixt and between spatial referents, originary worlds in a cycle of repetition. The protagonist is a nomad, an inhabitant of smooth (liminal) space, and the cycle does not come to a neat end as some have suggested. Encapsulating the allegorical readings of the film's finale, Fuentes proposes that Simón's appearance in the nightclub is indicative of a move 'de la cima a la sima, la más grande caída de todo el cine de Buñuel' (1993: 157). The fundamental difference, therefore, between Fuentes, Wood, and Agustín Mahieu's reading of the film and my own is one of directional planes; that is, a vertical (allegorical) reading versus a horizontal (spatial) reading: Simón's 'fall' naturally implies a definitive ending-place (hell), yet his nomadic existence gives primacy to the unfurling horizontal. It is in this vast, formless expanse that the smooth, the originary, and the liminal lie. Hence Simón's distinct lack of panic at the disco — he is not in Hell, but rather its waiting room. And he is in for a long wait.

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Simón del desierto (1965), una de las películas más originales de Luis Buñuel, ha sido quizá una de las más malinterpretadas por la crítica. A diferencia de otros filmes de Buñuel, este no ha sido tan abordado por los críticos. Entre la limitada investigación centrada en esta película, buena parte de ella considera su final en la discoteca como un infierno alegórico. Este artículo refuta la lectura alegórica a favor de una lectura espacial basada en el concepto de la liminalidad. La liminalidad — el estar entre referentes espaciales concretos, en el limbo — se emplea aquí para vincular la discoteca moderna del final de la película al desierto antiguo que se ve durante la mayoría del filme. Además relaciono las teorías de espacio liso y estriado elaboradas por Gilles Deleuze y Félix Guattari, junto con una consideración del mundo originario dentro del cine naturalista, propuesto por Deleuze, específicamente con la liminalidad, situando este artículo entre la tendencia reciente hacia una mayor contemplación del espacio en el cine de Buñuel. Así, se sugiere una lectura alternativa y aquí el desierto y la discoteca se consideran como planos contiguos donde el ciclo de repetición se perpetúa hasta la infinitud, descartando la posibilidad de plantear un *telos* conclusivo en el narrativo.

PALABRAS CLAVE Buñuel, *Simón del desierto*, liminalidad, espacio, Deleuze, mundo originario

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