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# Animation Is Film Review: 'Buñuel in the Labyrinth of the Turtles'

Based on a graphic novel, this terrific Spanish toon explores the making of Luis Buñuel's 'Las Hurdes' — and by extension, the director himself.

By PETER DEBRUGE




CREDIT: ANIMATION IS FILM

Director: Luis Buñuel  
With: Jorge Usón, Fernando Ramos, Luis Enrique de Tomás, Cyril Corral (Spanish, French dialogue)

Even in the endlessly eccentric annals of independent animation — where the Beatles' "Yellow Submarine" took flight and Ralph Bakshi tripped out amid jive-talking rabbits and X-rated cats — "Buñuel in the Labyrinth of the Turtles" is an oddity: a feature-length cartoon about the making of a 27-minute documentary. Frankly, it was a brilliant choice on the part of director Salvador Simó to use such an expressionistic medium to examine how surrealist filmmaker Luis Buñuel bent reality to his own ends in the making of 1933 documentary "Las Hurdes" (aka "Land Without Bread").

Of course, animation later proved fertile ground for Buñuel's friend — and fellow surrealist — Salvador Dalí (who designed "Destino" for Disney), seeing as the hand-drawn form is uniquely suited to what André Breton described as the surrealists' aim: "to resolve the previously contradictory conditions of dream and reality into an absolute reality, a super-reality." As many have observed about the medium, animation coaxes audiences into a kind of waking dream, which Simó inventively uses here to represent both what really happened during the shooting of "Las Hurdes" and the vivid nightmares Buñuel may have experienced during the process (Dalí-like dreams featuring long-legged elephants and swarms of yellow butterflies).

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The film opens in a Parisian café, where intellectuals passionately debate how surrealism can change public opinion, while Buñuel sits silently at the other end ... wearing a nun's habit. And so we meet the young filmmaker (later voiced by Jorge Usón) as a playful provocateur, pushing the boundaries of acceptability to challenge others' way of thinking — an attitude he would take with him to Extremadura, the region of Spain where he made "Las Hurdes," and where much of Simó's movie takes place.

Buñuel was down on his luck when he set out to make "Las Hurdes," having ignited a scandal in France with his film "L'Age d'Or," during the completion of which he parted ways with Dalí (a detail referenced but never satisfactorily explained). The ensuing controversy made it impossible to find financing for another film. That is, until his friend — and outspoken anarchist — Ramon Acin (Fernando Ramos) won the lottery, using the earnings to fund Buñuel's next project. Such colorful details, extrapolated from the precious little that is known about the making of "Las Hurdes," flower into a compelling and frequently surprising screenplay.

Though the film curiously stops short with the release of "Las Hurdes" (which yielded an elaborate story unto itself), in the lead-up to that scandal, Simó and co-writer Eligio Montero regale the audience with anecdotes that were either invented or loosely inspired by true events from other parts of Buñuel's life (plus a rather speculative thread about seeking his father's approval). That approach should be considered fair game, given Buñuel's own highly questionable methods of documenting "reality." In that respect, the film is not unlike "Infamous," which identifies Truman Capote's tendency to twist facts for the sake of a more compelling narrative during the writing of "In Cold Blood" and uses it against the author.

What is clear to anyone who watches "Las Hurdes" is that Buñuel was not attempting to make a straightforward documentary but one designed to shock, using the rough format of exotic travelogues to expose a situation far closer to home: There, in the impoverished community (whose maze of crudely shingled shacks gives the film its title), Buñuel found people living in almost medieval conditions, suffering from malnutrition, lack of hygiene, and severe inbreeding — all of which touch a different, more heart-rending nerve when accompanied by composer Arturo Cardelús' stunning score.

Before leaving for Extremadura, Buñuel read a book by Maurice Legendre about Las Hurdes that set certain expectations of what he would find. When the reality wasn't quite the same, he apparently had no qualms about staging the scenes he wanted to film — including several acts of extreme animal cruelty involving a tradition of ripping the head off a live chicken or arranging for a donkey to be stung to death by bees. And then there's the scene with the mountain goats, which reportedly fell to their death on the steep cliffs but had to be coaxed with bullets or pushed to do so on camera (audiences can see a gun go off at the edge of the frame in the documentary).

Simó makes the unusual choice of incorporating footage from "Las Hurdes" into the film, which serves to educate the audience, even as it stands in stark contrast with the highly stylized character designs — which were in turn suggested by Fermin Solis' graphic novel, on which the project was based. Though visually interesting, there's a certain sketchy crudeness in the way the characters are rendered, emphasized by the choice to animate "on threes" (where each drawing is held for three frames, as opposed to the traditional two), and rudimentary backgrounds and CG elements feel like missed opportunities to heighten the overall aesthetic, whose browns and grays mimic black-and-white cinematography of the era.

Stripped of the narration, these images prove quite startling, making Buñuel's seemingly jocular filmmaking approach feel all the more callous at times — especially when involving animals, although he also bent documentary rules by instructing children to play dead. Though undeniably charming, Buñuel can be a difficult character to like here, but that's the point: The movie dares to imagine the exact moment when Buñuel the callow prankster became Buñuel, engaged anthropologist of the human condition, whose later Mexico City masterpiece "Los Olvidados" was clearly informed by what he witnessed in Las Hurdes. As artistic contrivances go, is this one any less truthful than his documentary? And could the story of his transformation be any more surreal?

Animation Is Film Review: 'Buñuel in the Labyrinth of the Turtles'

Reviewed at Animation Is Film Festival (competing), Los Angeles, Oct. 20, 2018. Running time: 80 MIN. (Original title: "Buñuel en el Laberinto de las Tortugas")

PRODUCTION: (Animated — Spain-Netherlands) A Sygnatia, Glow, Submarine, Hampa Animation Studio production, with the participation of RTVE, Movistar Plus, Telemadrid, Canal Extremadura, Aragón TV, in association with 2DF, Arte. (Int'l. sales: Latido Films.) Producers: Manuel Cristóbal, José María Fernández de Vega, Femke Wolting, Bruno Felix, Alex Cervantes.

CREW: Director: Salvador Simó. Screenplay: Eligio Montero, Salvador Simó, based on the graphic novel by Fermin Solis. Camera (color, widescreen). Artistic direction: José Luis Ágreda. Editor: José Manuel Jiménez. Music: Arturo Cardelús.

WITH: Jorge Usón, Fernando Ramos, Luis Enrique de Tomás, Cyril Corral (Spanish, French dialogue)

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