

(both 1944), Buñuel was aware of the resemblances and acknowledged that Sartre's famous phrase "hell is other people" applies to many of his films. This goes especially for the ones revealing feral savagery coiled behind the façades of supposedly civilized society—shown in *Un Chien andalou* (1929), *Los Olvidados* (1950), and *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972), to name just three—and Buñuel saw his 1954 film of *Robinson Crusoe* as another variation on the isolation theme. He once considered a project along the lines of Théodore Géricault's painting "The Raft of the Medusa" (1818–19), with a throng of people jammed onto a rickety life raft, and I can't watch *The Exterminating Angel* without remembering Samuel Beckett's magisterial 1953 play *Waiting for Godot*, especially the very end. "Vladimir: Well? Shall we go? Estragon: Yes, let's go. (They do not move.)"

Although class and cultural critique are central to *The Exterminating Angel*, at its deepest levels the film is a meditation on time and repetition. In another Criterion extra, the great Mexican filmmaker Arturo Ripstein discusses the circular structure of the party, which ends when the guests resume their original positions. Space and time are interchangeable in the film, Ripstein insightfully notes, and this allows the narrative to be resolved, but only until it becomes muddled again almost immediately. More broadly, the many repetitions in the narrative, some as obvious as the one that ends the party and some vanishingly small, are signs of a larger, more profound repetition that Friedrich Nietzsche would have recognized. The incarceration will never stop replicating itself, Buñuel said in the aforementioned interview, describing it as "an epidemic that extends outward to infinity." *The Exterminating Angel* is in many ways a comedy, but it's as dark and philosophical a comedy as we're likely to see.

Always a restlessly international director, Buñuel was a Spaniard who made more films in France and Mexico than in his native country. *The Exterminating Angel* was his last picture shot in Mexico except for the short *Simon of the Desert* three years later. Ripstein says that other foreign directors who worked in Mexico on occasion (Sergei Eisenstein, John Ford, Joseph Losey) were seduced by the country's pictorial qualities and never got beyond them, whereas Buñuel avoided that temptation and also the tendency of native Mexicans, such as Emilio Fernández and Fernando de Fuentes, to idealize the rural poor. Before making his own directorial debut, Ripstein watched Buñuel shoot part of *The Exterminating Angel*, observing his attention to naturalistic detail—he smeared dirt and honey on the trapped partygoers to get the right grimy look—and his minimalist instructions to the cast. The latter technique recalls Hitchcock's way of directing actors, and Hitchcock counted Buñuel among his favorites, but Buñuel was more open than Hitchcock to

letting a movie evolve as it was being shot. "He knew what he wanted," Ripstein says, "and he made it happen."

The most elaborate Criterion extra is *The Last Script: Remembering Luis Buñuel*, a 2007 documentary by Spanish directors Javier Espada and Gaizka Urresti, in which Buñuel's filmmaker son Juan Luis Buñuel and frequent screenwriting partner Jean-Claude Carrière mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of his death by visiting places that figured in his life and work, from Madrid to Paris, to New York and beyond. Buñuel aficionados will be fascinated by it, especially when associates like Pinal and Gabriel Figueroa Flores, the son of Buñuel's superb cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa, are on screen, but the prevailing tone is a bit too casual and nostalgic. Interesting material also surfaces in a booklet essay by film scholar Marsha Kinder that links *The Exterminating Angel* with other Buñuel films and sketches out its production history.

For me, *The Exterminating Angel* and *Viridiana* are Buñuel's most brilliant films, and I agree with Ripstein that he created many of his finest works during his Mexican period. Since the production system there was "was sort of small-ish," Ripstein says, "he had to adapt [by] going to the basics," bypassing directorial luxuries like "great actors" and "formidable technicians" and even "beauty" in order to bring "the essence" of a project to life. "The essential films of Buñuel," the admiring Ripstein concludes, "are the most beautiful and the most touching and the most sensitive and no doubt the most mysterious of all his work." Nowhere are those qualities more evident than in *The Exterminating Angel*.—David Sterritt

Property Is No Longer a Theft

Produced by Claudio Mancini; directed by Elio Petri; screenplay by Elio Petri and Ugo Pirro; cinematography by Luigi Kuveiller; edited by Ruggero Mastroianni; art direction and costume design by Gianni Polidori; original score by Ennio Morricone; starring Flavio Bucci, Ugo Tognazzi, Daria Nicolodi, Mario Scaccia, Orazio Orlando, Julien Guiomar, Salvo Randone, and Luigi Proietti. Blu-ray and DVD, color, Italian dialogue with English subtitles, 126 min, 1973. An Arrow Academy release, <http://arrowfilms.co.uk>.

Directed by Elio Petri, one of the once celebrated but now sidelined writer-directors from the golden years of Italian cinema, the splashy, often jaw-droppingly cruel 1973 film *Property Is No Longer a Theft* reveals an uncommon ability to discuss social, political, and economic issues in startlingly modernist terms. This story of a bank teller allergic to money, who decides that stealing for his personal needs is a moral response to a capitalist world gone mad, has a relaxed dar-

ing that makes its grotesque, disjointed story a pleasure to watch. Exacting comically stylized performances from a choice cast that includes Ugo Tognazzi, Flavio Bucci, and Daria Nicolodi, Petri reaches into the heart of our modern malaise with money, and doesn't worry about drawing neat conclusions after the blood spills on the floor.

Petri was then a highly regarded director at the height of his career; he died in 1982 after a film version of Leonardo Sciascia's *Todo Modo* and a TV adaptation of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Dirty Hands*. *Property's* evident refinement and high culture, sardonic sophistication, modernist twists and, yes, static moments did not bode well for its audience appeal, yet it proved to be a major hit at the box office. The reason was simple: the sex scenes between Tognazzi and Nicolodi were far ahead of their time and an irresistible draw for Italian viewers. Nicolodi (at the time the partner of horror meister Dario Argento and star of *Deep Red*, as well as the future mother of actress Asia Argento) was a knockout in hot pants and high heels, and thanks to one explicit nude bedroom scene, is credited with being the first actress to appear on top of a man in an Italian movie.

Petri, an intellectual and committed communist, obviously saw things differently. He set the film within a hellish "neurosis" trilogy. *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion* (1969) related the hell of political power; *The Working Class Goes to Heaven* (1971) the neurosis of work created by mass production. Both starred a larger-than-life Gian Maria Volontè, and the second shared the Palme d'Or in Cannes with Francesco Rosi's *The Mattei Affair* (also starring Volontè) in 1972. For *Property Is No Longer a Theft*, the director chose the talented young stage actor Flavio Bucci as his ambiguous, unhinged hero to illustrate the hell of money and private property.

We meet "Mr. Total" (Bucci) counting bills and scratching his face behind the marble counters of a hushed institution that is more temple than bank, where men in narrow suits and ties kowtow to wealthy clients like a high-handed butcher (Tognazzi), who brazenly bribes them with cuts of meat before demanding a huge loan from the bank manager. When Total asks for a loan, he's told that, on his salary, he isn't entitled to a thousandth of that amount. As his boss none too gently reminds him, "Banks are for those who have money."

For his part, the butcher shamelessly justifies his wealth, claiming that to get rich you have to break all the commandments, and that he serves society by killing edible animals. "I dirty my hands so others can forget they're murderers." Tognazzi, who was already a major star, is a ruthless vulgarian in a role bordering on broad comedy. As he later remarked, "Petri made me do things from burlesque, things I had forgotten because I wanted to become a refined actor." It was effective casting.

The film unfolds on two levels: there's the grimly funny narrative about how Total targets, stalks, and steals from the butcher in such an infuriating way that he drives everyone crazy, and modernist interludes in which the actors stare directly into the camera and analyze their characters in a black, nondiegetic space. In reality the narrative and nonnarrative moments blend together like scotch and soda in Petri and Ugo Pirro's audacious screenplay, marked by a bitter comedy that makes no concessions: there's not a single character in the film who could be called positive, and if the audience sides with Total, it's only because no one else seems vaguely human.

The butcher, of course, excels in being despicable as he gloats over his possessions—houses, women, money. With impeccable logic, he claims to have nothing against the poor: "They're the ones enriching me." Visually, his butcher shop rhymes with the bank, a marble cathedral over which he presides like a priest at mass from the height of a marble altar, cheating his customers and cursing Anita, the woman behind the cash register.

This lovely lady (Nicolodi) lives with him in a palatial modern apartment furnished with expensive paintings, vases, and erotic Japanese art, where he mistreats her as a matter of course. (At one point, he offers to sell her to Total by the pound.) A pitiable victim of machismo? Not so fast: Anita not only dresses like a hooker, she is also keenly interested in the tenor of life the butcher gives her. As she confides to the camera (posed half-undressed with her legs spread wide), "I am a thing, many things—tits, thigh, belly, mouth...Open me up like a can of tomatoes." Those are hard truths to hear coming from the only female character in the film, and the way Anita's character teases the viewer generates a certain level of resistance and discomfort in the post-*Vagina Monologues* age. However, she does demonstrate ironic self-awareness of her subordi-



Mr. Total (Flavio Bucci) is a bank clerk who is allergic to money and decides to steal what he needs from a wealthy bank client in Elio Petri's *Property Is No Longer a Theft* (1973).

nate condition when she describes her relationship to the butcher: "I'm like a worker. He's the machine I have to operate."

In any other film, Anita and Total would discover they have a lot of exploitation in common and get together. But *Property* is much too dark and cynical for an easy romantic solution, even after she starts visiting him in the ramshackle railroad apartment where he lives in abject poverty with his old-fogey dad, delightfully played by Salvo Randone. Total describes himself as a Mandrakian Marxist—"I only steal what I need"—but it seems he needs things like caviar and a beautiful mistress. Since his search for the truth yields no answers, the film spins its wheels a bit.

A turning point comes when he teams up with a famous cabaret actor and thief, Albertone, played by the riveting Mario Scaccia like a hedonistic eccentric out of *Fellini Satyricon*. We have already glimpsed him in the film's intriguing opening credit sequence, which features a painting of grotesque, masklike faces by the politically engaged artist Renzo Vespianni. In the cen-

ter is Scaccia's face: half-man and half-woman, half-light and half-dark.

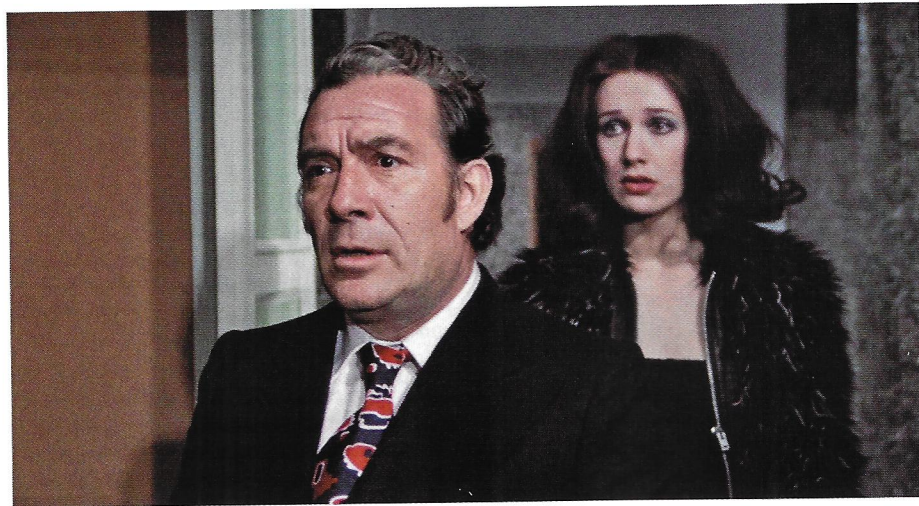
Albertone is well-known to the police as a calm, collected master thief, one who takes sexual pleasure in opening someone else's door. His penetration into the butcher's burglar-proof residence, followed by Total overpowering Anita, is yet another juxtaposition of sex, theft, and capitalism in a screenplay that increasingly seems to be following dream logic, distinguished by bizarre pairings and witty one-liners more than hard conclusions.

This Freudian atmosphere is heightened by the unexpected dissonance of Ennio Morricone's score, as effective as a sick lullaby in a horror film. Its tinkling notes and off-key chords seem to confirm Petri's thesis that capitalism leads to mental dissociation and illness.

Comedian Gigi Proietti delivers the concluding homily about a great thief's passing with a bit too much maudlin pathos, but he makes the interesting point that if all the thieves stopped stealing, the economy would collapse, being based as it is on protecting private property.

Arrow Academy's 4K restoration of the film from the original negative is marvelous to watch and gives this key film its due. The dual-format edition includes both a high-definition Blu-ray and a standard-definition DVD for the less technologically endowed. Extras include several new interviews. Flavio Bucci, who is now seventy but still articulate and charismatic, recalls the cultural ferment at the time the film was made and Petri's search for new ways of filmmaking and storytelling in line with a politically engaged cinema. An interview with producer Claudio Mancini is a trip down nostalgia lane for Italian film buffs. Sadly, many of the great technicians who contributed to the film are gone, and an interview with makeup artist Pierantonio Mecacci highlights the absence of editor Ruggero Mastroianni, production and costume designer Gianni Polidori, and the great cinematographer Luigi Kuveiller.

—Deborah Young



The Butcher (Ugo Tognazzi) and his mistress Anita (Daria Nicolodi) return home to find they are being burgled once again by Mr. Total, in this scene from *Property Is No Longer a Theft*.