Mexico City through the Eyes of Luis Buñuel

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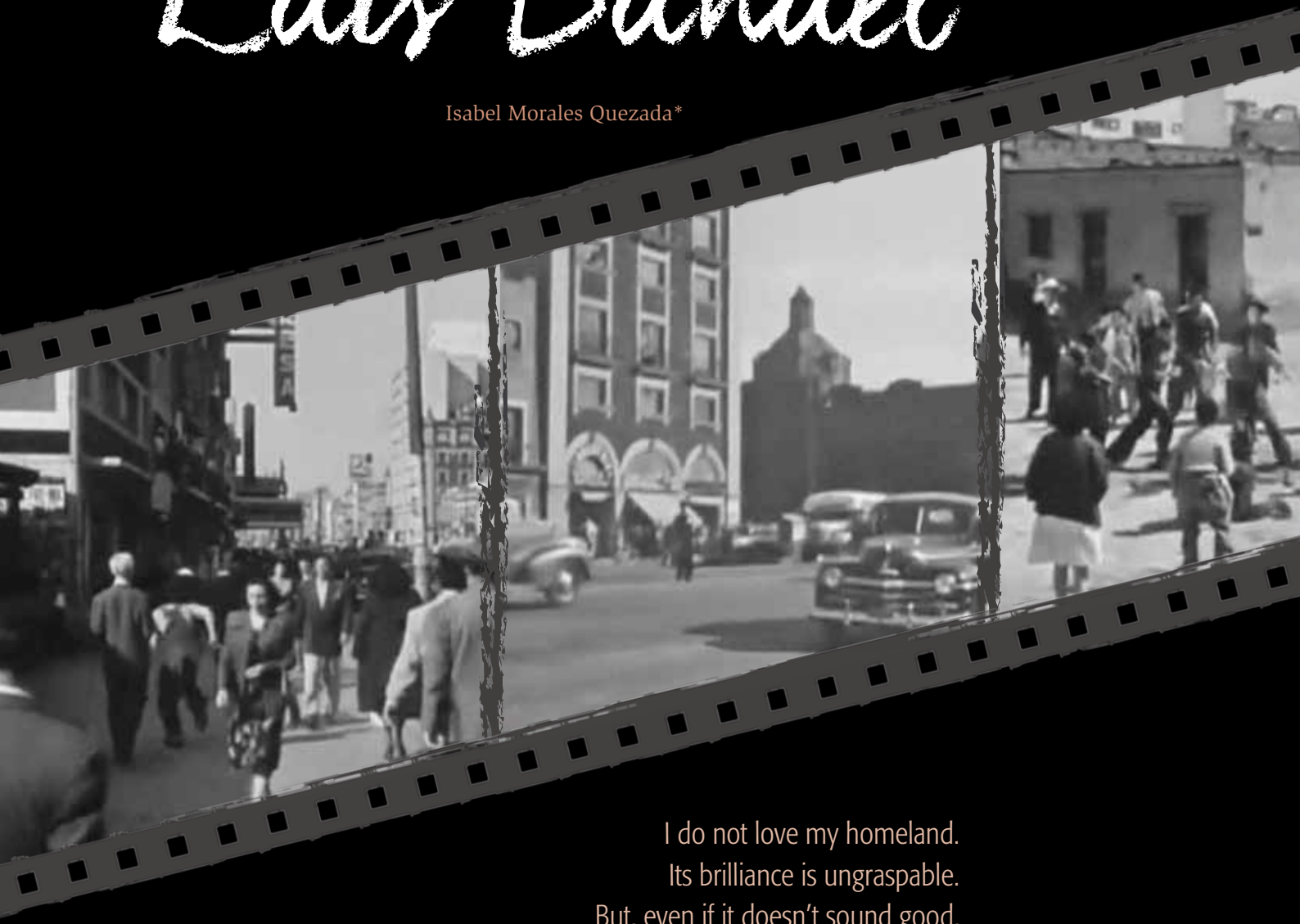
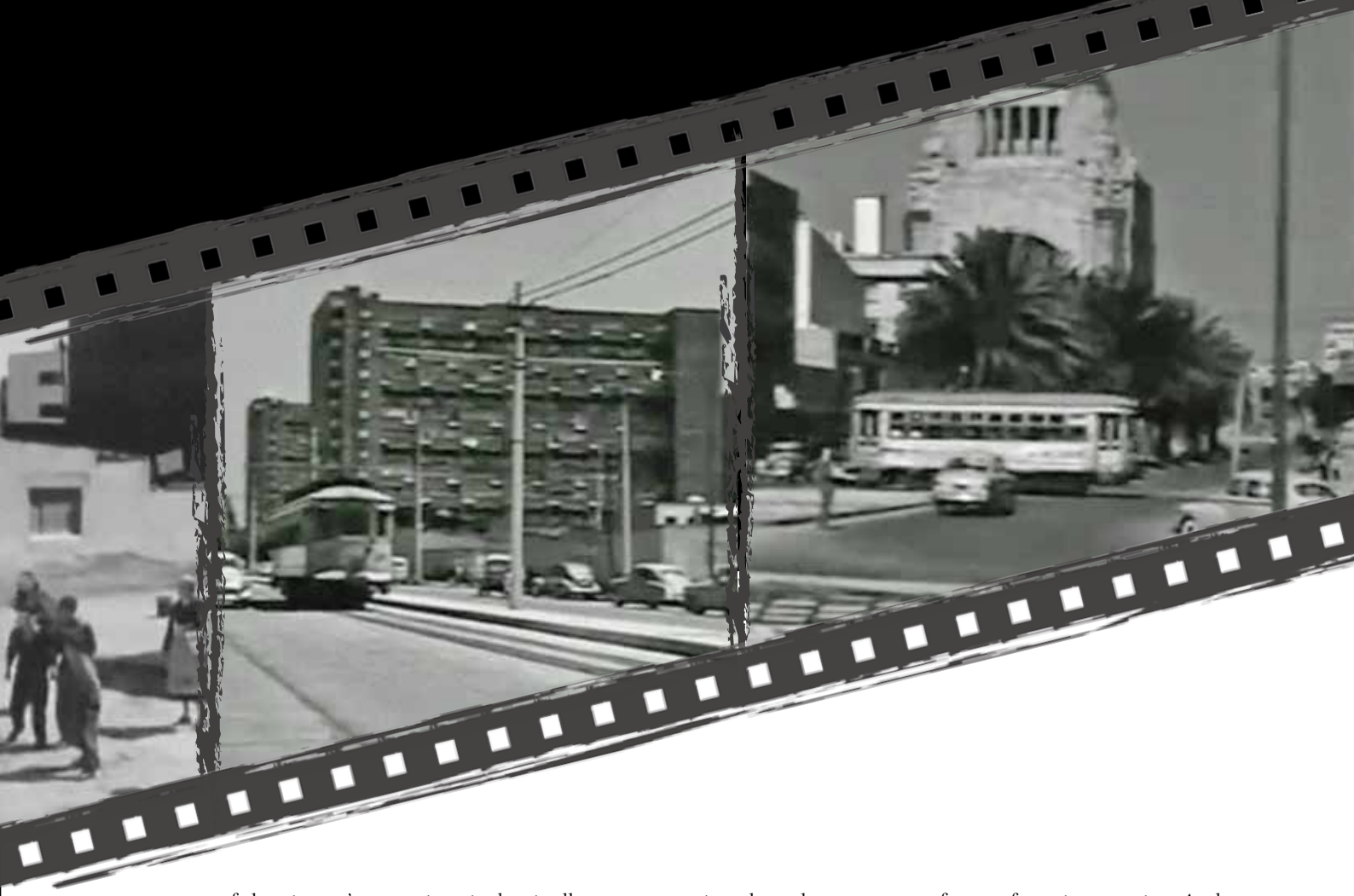


I do not love my homeland.
Its brilliance is ungraspable.
But, even if it doesn't sound good,
I would give my life
for ten of its places, certain people,
ports, pine forests, fortresses,
a city undone, grey, monstrous,
figures in its history, mountains
—and three or four rivers.

José Emilio Pacheco
"Alta traición" (High Treason)[1]



One of the cinema's attractions is that it allows us to glimpse other eras. This is what a large number of the films that Luis Buñuel shot in Mexico represent today: the opportunity to delve into the past of a city and its inhabitants, to discover places that have disappeared, changed, or remained inured to the passage of time; the possibility of wandering through Mexico City through the particular gaze of a cinematographer who was always ahead of his time.

Luis Buñuel, born in Spain, was a naturalized Mexican citizen. He came to live here in 1946, and although his first movie, *Gran Casino* (released in English as *Magnificent Casino*) is more commercial, his later work broke with the canons of the so-called "Golden Age" of Mexican cinema, where morality and happy endings were the norm. His film *Los olvidados* (*The Young and the Damned* in English), made in 1950 and inscribed in the UNESCO's Memory of the World Register in 2003, is the most representative case of this break. Buñuel's is not a "sugar-coated version" of poverty, as Carlos Fuentes described the way the issue had been dealt with in cinema until then.[2] Rather, he transports us to the forgotten parts of a big city, where the poverty we often prefer to ignore exists. At the beginning of the movie, the narrator warns the audience,

> Behind their magnificent buildings, the big modern cities, New York, Paris, London, hide poor homes housing undernourished children, with no hygiene, no schools, a breeding ground for future criminals. Society tries to correct this evil, but with very limited success. . . . Big, modern Mexico City is no exception to this universal rule. That's why this film, based on real life, is not optimistic.

What differentiated Luis Buñuel from his contemporaries in Mexico was his interest in showing other realities, warts and all, without leaving behind his fascination with surrealism. It was precisely his interest in those ignored, censored worlds that made him take special care with the locations for all his films. In *Los olvidados*, most of the scenes are shot in the real places of a city that was beginning to grow, to fill in and disappear at the same time:

> Mexico City began to grow, to spread out. The nearby old agricultural towns began to merge, but between them and the city, what were called "lost cities" sprang up: irregular settlements

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All photos by Mercury.

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inhabited mainly by immigrants from the rest of the country who had come in search of jobs. These old towns began to become a part of the metropolis.[3]

The young character Jaibo, played by Roberto Cobo, who has escaped from a reformatory, walks freely along what is now known as Mexico City's Eje Central (Central Boulevard). Behind him, the audience can see the vertical marquis of the Teresa Cinema, which, surprisingly, still exists. Cars pass on the boulevard and people hurry along the sidewalk, men in suits and women going to work; a man is washing his car and a sandwich salesman shouts his wares. It's an agitated city, alive and noisy. An inhabitant of today could still recognize some of these places, though now they are noisier and the itinerant sellers are on every corner. The periphery that began to be settled in the 1950s is by now an extension of a city that has become infinite and unfathomable.

The modernity that the narrator mentions at the beginning of the film, with its broad avenues, office buildings, and cinemas, is juxtaposed with the nearby towns, neighborhoods, and other cities that get lost among nooks and corners, where shawls and provincial clothing mix with the overalls of workers and cotton shirts. Enclaves made of corrugated sheet metal, cardboard, and wood, surrounded by new concrete buildings, big structures, and neighborhoods that are urbanized but still preserve the small-town air, like the Romita neighborhood, where the marginalized kids gather to talk about their adventures and the stories woven in these spaces, witnessed by a little church dating from 1530 and that still stands today. A few steps away from the Roma neighborhood, this space and its church preserve today a feeling of quiet compared to the noise of their surroundings.

The city, for its part, continues to be built, and its growth is blind and overwhelming. In several key scenes of *Los olvidados*, unfinished spaces are used as no-man's lands and at the same time as hideouts. Construction sites or developments are a kind of limbo for people with nowhere to go, places that will not be crowded until they're finished. Nonoalco, one of the places where Jaibo hides from the police, was populated for a long time by recently-arrived immigrants who came in search of work. In that same place, but 14 years later, in 1964, the enormous, modern Nonoalco-Tlatelolco housing project would be inaugurated, designed by architect Mario Pani, and dubbed by Carlos Monsiváis "the Utopia of a Mexico without tenements."

Large urban centers like Mexico City have a history of construction and destruction as an interminable cycle. In the film, the Medical Center is about to be built on the flatlands of the Doctores neighborhood, its structures jutting up like

Central Boulevard.

The Teresa Cinema.

great steel monsters, cold and hostile. However, 35 years later, on September 19, 1985, some of the hospitals in that center were flattened by an earthquake that put an end to many other emblematic sites in the city, like the Nuevo León Building in the Tlatelolco housing project. Despite this, the Medical Center was rebuilt, and the Tlatelolco project still stands, the survivor of that earthquake and other events in Mexico's history.

Finally, the Tlalpan Farm School that appears in the film was located on the land where the Hospital of Neurosurgery and Neurology now stands. The farm was a project to reintegrate into society young men living on the streets or who had misbehaved; the boys grew crops and raised animals and the school earned money from the proceeds of their sale. It was located in the La Fama neighborhood in the southern part of the city, which still preserves its wooded areas and a picturesque air, particularly in the main plaza and environs of the San Fernando neighborhood.

But Buñuel was not only interested in recounting what happened in the dark, marginalized cracks of a great city; he also knew how to capture the essence of a people who had fun wandering and experiencing Mexico City in a very special way. This is what happens in *La ilusión viaja en tranvía* (Illusion Travels by Streetcar) (1953), in which the two main characters, played by Carlos Navarro and Fernando "Mantequilla" Soto, take us on a streetcar tour of different parts of the city. This form of transportation has disappeared, leaving its mark in the form of the tracks on the pavement of the avenues where they used to run. During the trip, the city emerges in its day-to-day bustle, in its splendor as a city that had recently debuted in modernity. Here, the narrator explains,

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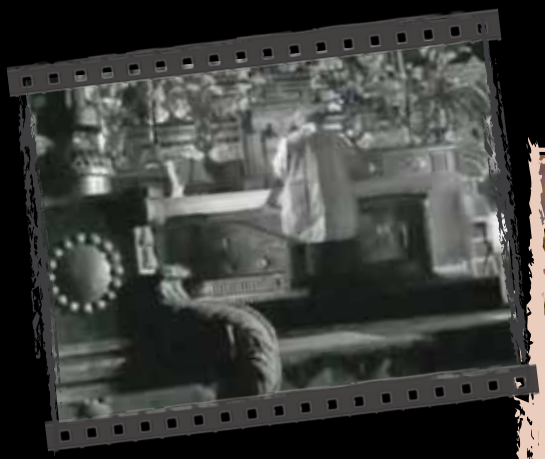
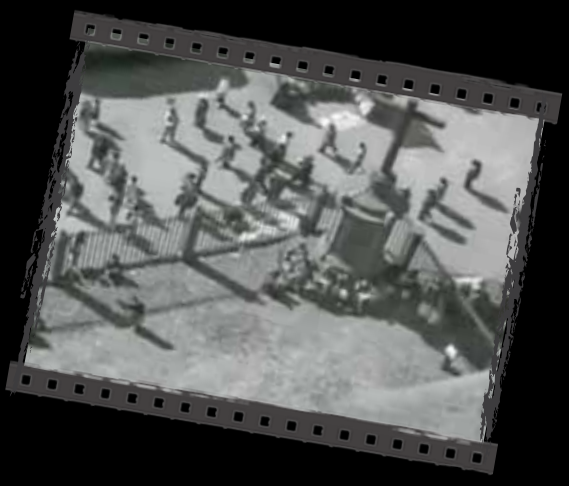
> Mexico City, a great city like many in the world, is the stage for the most varied and disconcerting events . . . ; millions of men and women weave their fleeting, simple stories, hour after hour, their actions and words always moving toward the realization of a dream, of a desire, of an illusion. United, they all form the colossal swarm of city life. . . . And so, this film will be just another story, simple and almost trivial, of the life of the modest working people who make up the great mass, the ones who travel by streetcar.

The trip has one special characteristic: it's illicit. It seems that the characters, who drive their beloved streetcar, have gotten drunk and decided to spirit it out of the yard in the wee hours after it has been put out to pasture as old and useless. So, the unexpected, unusual trip takes the audience into equally unexpected situations, looking out the window

The Romita neighborhood.

The Indianilla Station.





The Metropolitan Cathedral's atrium, altar, and bell tower.

Cuauhtémoc Circle.

of a means of transportation that no longer exists, at what is happening out there, in the streets of the big city.

The Monument to the Revolution, the Statue of Diana, the trolleys and streetcars that crisscrossed the city at that time are the first images that introduce us to the film. On the trip, not only will we come across those places, but also all their inhabitants on an ordinary day. The old streetcar goes up Tlalpan Boulevard to Xochimilco and is forced to make stops; the first is at the slaughterhouse, where passengers board with pieces of meat to sell. Later, it stops to pick up a group of children and the teacher in charge when they confuse it with the "special" streetcar that will take them on a school trip. The children and their teacher wait in front of the Centenario Cinema that used to be in downtown Coyoacán, in the Hidalgo Garden, in a place that now houses a store. It is curious that the streetcar also functions as a kind of equalizer because, although Buñuel, incisive as he was, did not forget to mark the difference between the popular classes and the bourgeoisie, at the end of the day, everyone needs to get on board.

After several circuits, the trip continues through the Glorieta de Colón (Columbus Circle), Buena Vista, and ends up where it started: at the Indianilla streetcar repair and maintenance yard. The yard began operating in 1880, when the streetcars were pulled by mules or horses, and was vacated in 1985 when the electric streetcars disappeared. The yard was abandoned for 20 years, but in 2006, the space was used to create the Indianilla Station Cultural Center, with two contemporary art galleries and the Frida Art Object Toy Museum, which shows work by artists like Leonora Carrington, Francisco Toledo, Sergio Hernández, Brian Nissen, Luis Nishizawa, Rodolfo Morales, and Raúl Anguiano.

The trip is circular, perhaps because, as the narrator says at the end, the characters in this city "once again return to the day-to-day, simple rhythm of their lives, while their footsteps move through the oft-traveled streets. . . . Meanwhile, the big city will continue to scheme and create thousands of different stories." There will always be a story to tell, because the city creates millions of them, even if some only follow the routine of the day before, going down the same streets to get to work or school. Many of the stories that unfold today take place in the same scenarios as the film, but others have disappeared together with the customs of that time, like traveling by streetcar.

In *Ensayo de un crimen* (released in English as *Rehearsal for a Crime* and also as *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz*) and *Él* (*This Strange Passion*, also known as *Torments*), Mexico City is the perfect stage to tell the story of two obsessive, angst-ridden characters. Archibaldo de la Cruz (played

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by Ernesto Alonso) and Francisco Galván (played by Arturo de Córdova) are men who are comfortable economically, but whose strange preoccupations do not let them live in peace. These two films underline the contrast between the calm homes of both characters, refuges where they can establish their own norms, and the city. In the case of Archibaldo, it makes him remember that he still has not been able to fulfill his most important goal since childhood: committing murder. Francisco, on the other hand, feels threatened by the city and its inhabitants, obstacles to his happiness. The places where these houses are located, like the San Ángel neighborhood in the south of the city, evoke that quiet; cobblestoned, tree-lined streets with little vehicular traffic or pedestrians make you think they don't belong to the city. Today, urbanization has enveloped them, and they are surrounded by buildings and busy avenues.

Another of Francisco Galván's refuges are the capital's churches, like the San Juan Bautista Church in Coyoacán, used to shoot some of the exteriors. One example is when Francisco enters a church and meets the women he will fall in love with; another is the interior of the San Diego Churubusco Church, where he suffers an attack of paranoia toward the end of the movie.[4] Both these churches continue to be visited by Mexico City residents, as do the gardens in downtown Coyoacán where Archibaldo walks, one of city's most popular public plazas, which on weekends fills up with life, music, and cultural activities and, during the week, breathes more quietly, where people walk or just sit on one of the benches reading a book.

The Metropolitan Cathedral is another of the venues for a scene in *Él*. Sick of people, Francisco takes his wife up into the cathedral's bell tower and from up there shows her the city, all the while telling her of his disdain for his fellow men. The shot shows part of Mexico City's crowded Zócalo square, today one of the most important public gathering places and where many go for a weekend stroll.

At the end of the movies, both characters begin new lives, though each in his own way. The final scenes show them in tranquil places: Archibaldo, walking in Chapultepec Forest, and Francisco, inside the Former Churubusco Monastery, which dates from the sixteenth century and today houses the National Museum of Interventions that narrates the history of foreign invasions of Mexico.

The city is not only noise and automobiles, but also places to escape from the urban din. These places have remained standing until our day because, who can live without a haven that, when needed, makes us forget, even if only for a moment, the city's madness?

The Miguel Alemán housing project.

Columbus Circle.

In all these films, Luis Buñuel captured forever the "great city" of the early 1950s, with its avenues, its neighborhoods, its churches and leisure venues, that is, the places where today's inhabitants still go and that are part of their identity. Their stories make us look through the characters' eyes, which are also Buñuel's, at a metropolis in constant movement and growth. A chameleon-like, immense city that, looked at with the perspective of time, reveals itself as a giant that is destroyed and is built uncontrollably, but also endures, stoic, a survivor. Buñuel's films are testimony to a living city; they represent the possibility of peeking into the past, reliving it, and even feeling nostalgia for a place that was situated between modernity and the countryside, between innovation and tradition. Just like the stories that Buñuel imagined, the Mexico City of today continues weaving its own history and that of its inhabitants. VM

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Notes

[1] José Emilio Pacheco, "Alta traición," *No me preguntes cómo pasa el tiempo: poemas 1964-1968* (Mexico City: ERA, 1998).

[2] Carlos Fuentes, *Luis Buñuel, el contexto social y literario de su obra fílmica*, Descarga Cultura UNAM, http://descargacultura.unam.mx/app1#autores APP1.

[3] Cynthia Pech, "Tiempo y destino: la fragilidad del bien en *Los olvidados*," *Andamios* vol. 2, no. 3, 2005, pp. 107-127, http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S187000632005000200005&lng=es&nrm=iso, accessed September 22, 2014.

[4] Ciudad de México en el tiempo, *Luis Buñuel*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OksIY162fp4&feature=youtu.be, accessed September 22, 2014.

Chapultepec Lake.

The San Ángel neighborhood.