

# Parodies of Christian Wandering in Luis Buñuel's Films

*Lars Nowak*

*PD Dr. Lars Nowak is a lecturer in Media Studies at the Institute of Theater and Media Studies of Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany. His work focuses on film history and theory, photography, cartography, and connections between media history and the history of the sciences.*

## Abstract

This essay investigates parodic profanations of Christian peregrination in three films by Luis Buñuel: *Nazarín* (1959), *Simón del desierto* (1965), and *La Voie lactée* (1969). Proceeding from Jesus Christ, Simeon the stylite, and Santiago de Compostela, these movies focus on two central figures of religious wandering, the itinerant preacher and the pilgrim, whose devout essence is subverted in manifold ways ranging from heresy and eroticism to social failure and homelessness. In this connection, walking is distinguished from artificial and supernatural forms of locomotion, but at the same time connected to surrealist time travels and narrative digressions. The article traces how the motif of walking is related to the movies' formal features and carefully examines the intertextual relations that tie the films not only to each other, but also to the picaresque novel as an important model of profanation.

**Keywords:** Christianity, itinerant preacher, pilgrimage, profanation, parody

## Introduction

Since film is a medium of moving images, not only driving but also walking fulfills important aesthetic functions within it, ranging from the exploration of the spaces crossed to the social and emotional characterization of the walking characters to the evocation of specific feelings on the part of the audience. Yet, while motorized locomotion has developed its own genre, the road movie, and, therefore, been the subject of extensive academic research, the same does not apply to walking, which could only sporadically attract the film scholars' attention (e.g. Pang 2006; Antunes 2012; Banita/ Ellenbürger/ Glasenapp 2017).

To choose an appropriate metaphor, this essay strives to take a further step in this direction by examining the role of Christian walking in Luis Buñuel's films, which are ideally suited for such an analysis. Although, with *Subida al cielo* (1951) and *La ilusión viaja en tranvía* (1953), this director created two films that refer to motorized translocation (Acevedo-Muñoz 2003, 111–123), the fetishization of, especially female, legs, feet and shoes is also one of his typical themes, as is proven, for instance, by *L'Âge d'Or* (1930), *Ensayo de un crimen* (1955) and *Tristana* (1970) (Fragola 1994). This fetishization, which is often accompanied by a partialization of the body through close-ups or certain means of the *mise-en-scène*, often presupposes an immobilization, but can also, as in *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre* (1963), refer to the female gait (Buñuel 1994, 241).

Now, in many of Buñuel's films, walking is not merely erotically charged, but is also closely related to one of their other central subjects, the Christian faith. Buñuel had a divided relationship to Christianity, which is equally evident from various biographical anecdotes, numerous verbal statements and his cinematic work. Due to his origin and education, Buñuel had excellent knowledge of Catholic theology, the indoctrination of which had shaped him to such a high degree that in his movies he returned to it again and again – causing it, from the perspective of a progressing social secularization, to increasingly take on an obsessive character. Thus, his films are based on a deeply religious feeling, an affirmation of the mysterious, enigmatic and inexplicable (Ayfre 1962–63, 47; Riera 1978, 219; Midding 2008, 31–32). Despite his understanding for individual faith, though, Buñuel rejected the institutionalized church because of its rationalization of the irrational through a dogmatic

belief system and its support of the existing social order's injustices, being itself one of its parasitic beneficiaries (Schwarze 1981, 76–85; Midding 2008, 33). This is why in his films Christianity is persistently deprived of its alienation from material reality and reconnected to the human body and its grotesque aspects (Capriles 1978, 308). In this context, the Christian condemnation of sexuality as sin is undermined by using this notion for a perverse intensification of bodily pleasure (Stam 1989, 105–106, 177; Irwin 1995, 40). While from the perspective of Christianity itself, these strategies must appear as blasphemous degradations of the sacred, they also lead to its fundamental humanization.

Although Buñuel's stance towards Christianity has received comprehensive attention in film studies, the related role of walking, however important for this religion, has been touched upon only marginally at best. Hence, I will examine this connection systematically by focusing on three essential movies, *Nazarín* (1959), *Simón del desierto* (1965) and *La Voie lactée* (1969), all of which won awards at major international film festivals during their years of release.<sup>1</sup> While at that time *Simón del desierto* was unanimously classified by anglophone critics as a “study of pathological obsession” (Christie 2004, 129), whose distanced, documentary-like style was particularly emphasized by Pauline Kael (Ros 2004, 77), the original reception of the other two films reflects Buñuel's ambivalence towards Christianity. On the one hand, *Nazarín* was not only enthusiastically received in atheistic circles, but was, in fact, also considered by the Catholic film office for an award (Buache 1973, 97–98). On the other hand, *La Voie lactée* was classified as pro-Christian by some and anti-Christian by others (Christie 2004, 128–129). Although the Interfilm Award, which went to Buñuel's film, had been sponsored by the German Protestant Church, the work was accused of resentful one-sidedness in the *Evangelischer Filmbeobachter*. In addition, British and American critics rejected this movie as an idiosyncratic and obsolete repetition of familiar themes, while it was celebrated in the French press. In the *Cahiers du cinéma*, for example, *La Voie lactée* was praised for its formally innovative construction of irreconcilable contradictions. (Christie 2004, 129–131)

Today, the three movies belong to Buñuel's lesser-known works, but enjoy a canonical status as they are among those of his films that make use of surrealist themes and techniques. In addition to logical

absurdities, temporal and spatial discontinuities and interminglings of the real and the imaginary, this also includes their specific treatment of religion. In particular, they subject two classical figures representing the walking Christian – the self-chastening pilgrim and the travelling preacher – to a parodic reinvention, which places them in the surrealistic field of tension between erotic sensuality and esoteric extrasensoriness.

In the following, I will conduct a textual and intertextual analysis of *Nazarín*, *Simón del desierto* and *La Voie lactée* that is based on the metalinguistic concept of dialogism (Bakhtin 1984, 5–46, 181–269), which, thanks to Julia Kristeva's mediation, made Mikhail Bakhtin one of the founders of the theory of intertextuality (e.g. Kristeva 1980, 64–91). According to Bakhtin, dialogism is the convergent or divergent encounter of two different voices within one verbal or non-verbal utterance. A special role in this connection is played by carnivalism, which Bakhtin understands as a dialogical counter-discourse to the monological discourse of official Christian culture (Bakhtin 1984, 122–132). A crucial element of this counter-discourse is profanation, which only negates the sacred in order to renew it (Bakhtin 1968, 16–17, 40–41, 83, 266–267, 418–419; Bakhtin 1984, 123, 139), often makes use of parody (Bakhtin 1968, 7, 13–15, 83–88, 379, 413–420; Bakhtin 1984, 123, 127–128, 136) and sometimes, as in the case of the *Coena Cypriani*, refers to the body's metabolism (Bakhtin 1968, 13, 20, 84, 286–289). As we will see in detail, these issues are taken up by the three films in question, which parody Christian pilgrims and itinerant preachers in ways that at the same time draw inspirations from the picaresque novel. However, instead of metabolism, the bodily function of locomotion is now paramount.

### **Vertical and horizontal movements of an ancient stylite**

In *Nazarín* and *Simón del desierto*, walking and Christianity seem to exclude each other at first glance, because many commentaries on these two films have emphasized their vertical movements, not the horizontal ones that are predetermined for walking: It is often said that *Nazarín* first tries to rise above his fellow human beings through his imitation of Jesus, but is then brought back to their level (e.g. Bastaire 1963, 218; Midding 2008, 33–34). This sequence of ascent and descent becomes even clearer in the movie *Simón del desierto*, which deals with the late ancient Syrian hermit Simeon

Stylites the Elder and conventionally divides the physical space in three parts: While Satan, through his coffin, is assigned to hell below and ordinary people to the earth, Simón strives for heaven (Goimard 1969, 9–10). Similar to other stylites, the historical Simeon spent most of his life standing on increasingly higher columns and, after having succumbed to an erotic temptation, even continued this practice on one leg for self-punishment (Ros 2004, 74). Accordingly, Buñuel's Simón changes from a lower to a higher pillar right at the beginning of the film and, while predominantly standing on it, permanently lifts one leg after its first half as punishment for a successful deception by the devil. The vertical dimension is emphasized not only by pre-filmic up and down movements along the two pillars, but also by the camera, which pans along the columns and Simón's legs and takes up lower and upper views. In the end, the ascetic is brought down from the column by his diabolical adversary, who carries him off to New York in an airplane and places him in an apparently underground nightclub that is also associated with hell. Since the wide spatial leap across the Atlantic is combined with a similarly large leap in time from late antiquity to the present, the plane also functions as a time machine (Christie 2004, 137). Just as in this case, the devil is above the laws of nature in his other movements as well and, in extreme cases, can even suddenly appear out of nowhere and disappear again.

Nevertheless, although these supernatural movements are even further removed from walking than the vertical movements, the erect posture Simón adopts on his column is a prerequisite for the upright human gait. And by raising one leg, the hermit even seems to be taking a first step – particularly as in later times, wandering Syrian ascetics actually appeared as well, which, in the late Middle Ages, were combined with their sedentary Egyptian counterparts under the term 'peregrinus,' because in both cases home was left due to a longing for the afterlife (Krüger et al. 2003, 424). Furthermore, *Simón del desierto* begins with a church procession to Simón's column and later repeatedly uses the sound of the Good Friday drums from Buñuel's eastern Spanish hometown Calanda, which also accompanied a procession (Buñuel 1994, 19–21).

Buñuel's film, however, only apparently characterizes walking as a pious activity, opposing the extrasensory movements of Satan. In fact, during his first two appearances, the devil visits Simón on foot.

Attempting to seduce him by taking the shape of a young girl, he not only presents his tongue and breasts, but also his beautiful legs, which bear a striking contrast with the maltreated ones of the ascetic himself. While in this case unmoved legs are erotically charged, this is subsequently transferred to the moving legs of the frenetic dancers in the New York nightclub. Simón, on his part, is by no means unaffected by this fetishization of legs, but succumbs to a daydream that adds an Oedipal meaning and combines dancing with running: He longs to run across "Madre Tierra"<sup>2</sup> with his actual mother, playfully catching up and dancing in circles with her.

### **Profanations of pilgrimage by two meandering vagabonds**

Buñuel had originally planned further scenes for *Simón del desierto*, which also included pilgrimages (Buñuel 1994, 240; Oms 1985, 147) – for Simeon's column represented the most important Christian site for pilgrimage in late antiquity and was, therefore, vaulted after his death with a monumental church (Goimard 1969, 8; Krüger et al. 2003, 425). Pilgrimage is typically also made on foot or at least involves a walk around the shrine at the pilgrim's destination (Krüger et al. 2003, 409, 412; Nicholson 2008, 190–191). Although it can be found in many religions, it has a special meaning in Christianity, because its practitioners in former times generally regarded themselves as "'pilgrims,' that is, strangers on the earth", whose true "homeland was in heaven" (Agamben 2007, 84), such that pilgrimage became a symbol of life's journey (Krüger et al. 2003, 408, 431). Just as Simeon chastised himself by standing on one leg, in the Christian Middle Ages, penitential, expiatory and punitive pilgrimages also served as self-punishment for sins committed, in order to enable a re-admission into the church or the secular community. This was based not only on the idea that walking was sometimes a punishment imposed by God, who, for example, had condemned Cain to an existence as a vagabond after the murder of his brother, Abel, but also on the fact that travelling – especially travelling on foot – was at that time arduous and dangerous, which could be made even worse by taking certain measures, such as walking barefoot. Only later was this aspect sidelined in favor of the ritual activities at the pilgrim's destination with the development and use of modern means of transport. (Krüger et al. 2003, 409, 427; Amato 2004, 51, 53–55; Nicholson 2008, 186)

Now, Christian pilgrimage was not only intended to be a theme in *Simón del desierto*, but actually found its way into other films by Buñuel: *Nazarín* makes an allusion to it when, upon the arrival of its eponymous antihero at the sickbed of Beatriz's niece, the gathered women thank the Virgin of Guadalupe, whose site of appearance is today one of the most frequented destinations of pilgrimage in the entire world (Krüger et al. 2003, 409, 429). Likewise, the evening party mysteriously locked inside a parlor in *El ángel exterminador* (1962) and thus deprived of its freedom of movement swears an oath, in the event of its liberation, to go on pilgrimages, the typical motifs of which indeed include gratitude for blessings received (Krüger et al. 2003, 409).

The motif of pilgrimage reaches its climax in the film *La Voie lactée*, which sends its two male protagonists from Paris to Santiago de Compostela on the Way of St. James. Because in the 11th century, the pilgrimage movement to Santiago de Compostela seized the entire Latin West, this northern Spanish town was the most important pilgrimage destination in the Middle Ages, aside from Rome and Jerusalem. And since Santiago de Compostela, in contrast to Jerusalem, was visited not only by the upper but also by the lower classes, which always travelled on foot, the Santiago pilgrim was soon equated with the *peregrinus* par excellence. After a temporary loss of importance, Santiago de Compostela was rediscovered as a place of pilgrimage in the 20th century. (Capriles 1978, 309; Krüger et al. 2003, 424, 426–427, 429, 433; Amato 2004, 51, 53; Leisch-Kiesl/Sauer 2005, 255)

*La Voie lactée* begins with a dogmatic explanation of the Way of St. James, according to which the bones of St. James, a disciple of Jesus, are kept in the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, and underscores this position through the imitation of a conventional documentary film using two authoritarian devices: a voice-over commentary and a map view. Additionally, the two main characters largely walk to the Spanish pilgrimage site; and this is laborious in their case, too, as can be seen from their relief when they reach their destination and from the earlier lamentation of the older of the two men about his aching feet. Finally, the travellers' names, "Pierre" and "Jean," equate them with two further apostles, Peter and John, a brother of James (Durgnat 1977, 147; Capriles 1978, 310), who actually accompanied Jesus on his ramblings to spread his doctrine.

However, just as in *El ángel exterminador*, the promised pilgrimages ultimately become superfluous, as this movie ends with a new confinement, *La voie lactée* subjects the pilgrimage on the Way of St. James to a multiple parody, for which a model can be found in François Rabelais's carnivalesque cycle of novels *Gargantua et Pantagruel* (1532–64) (Bakhtin 1968, 311–312). To begin with, the two travellers are not exactly “en pèlerinage,” as they themselves explain to a prostitute at their destination. Rather, we are dealing with two vagrants who lead a fundamentally nomadic life. At first glance, this may seem to correspond to the above-mentioned self-conception of Christians as earthly pilgrims. Yet, although medieval pilgrims sometimes turned into vagabonds on their way, there was a distinct difference between these two groups: While the former enjoyed the protection of the authorities, the latter were fought by them. The authorities also took action against attempts to misuse pilgrimages for criminal purposes. (Amato 2004, 53, 55) For example, high penalties and documents of authenticity were intended to prevent thieves, robbers and spies from posing as pilgrims, and pilgrim stamps to protect against the sending of deputies on pilgrimages for payment.

In addition, Jean and Pierre are largely walking in the film, which is set in the present day, merely because they have had little success in their attempts to hitchhike. The contrast between slow walking and fast driving is already emphasized in the movie's exposition, in which the historical explanations are followed by shots of today's highways. Later, this opposition is continued by two different subjectivations of the camera, which here moves horizontally rather than vertically: After passing the two beggars in a car that crashed shortly afterwards, the camera is hand-held and carried on foot to show Santiago de Compostela emerging behind the trees from the vagabonds' point of view. Thus, just as walking is opposed to flying in *Simón del desierto*, it is contrasted with driving in *La Voie lactée*.

On their way to Santiago de Compostela, Jean and Pierre encounter the six great mysteries of Catholicism, ranging from the nature of the divine Trinity to the question of the origin of evil. In addition to the relevant dogmatic positions, however, the heretical viewpoints are also represented, while the two beggars remain unimpressed by either, clinging to their down-to-earth realism or, in Jean's case, even tending towards an anticlerical and atheistic



attitude. (Durgnat 1977, 147; Capriles 1978, 309–310; Oms 1985, 151; Christie 2004, 133–134; Leisch-Kiesl/Sauer 2005, 255, 257)

Here, the model of pilgrimage is superimposed by a second, profane one, that of the picaresque novel, which was created by Spanish writers during the 16th century and greatly appreciated by Buñuel (Christie 2004, 133, 137; Buñuel 1994, 220). This intertextual reference, mediated by Wojciech Has's picaresque film *Rekopis znaleziony w Saragossie* (1965) (Christie 2004, 138–139), was even explicitly referenced in the prologue originally planned for *La Voie lactée*, but then rejected (Capriles 1978, 309; Durgnat 1977, 147; Midding 2008, 34). It concerns two levels: On the one hand, many picaresque novels also tell of the journeys of socially marginalized characters divided into individual episodes. Similarly, the mysteries depicted in Buñuel's film, as a rule, grow into extended and independent metadiegeses (Irwin 1995, 43), which sometimes even lose sight of Jean and Pierre. Just as, according to Michel de Certeau, urban passers-by can undercut the specifications of urban planners (Certeau 1988, 95–102), Buñuel's film in this way repeatedly diverges from the main route to Santiago de Compostela and embarks on narrative detours that constitute a formal counterpart to the heresies represented (Irwin 1995, 43–44). On the other hand, Jean and Pierre, through their lack of understanding towards the theological disputes, share with the picaresque novels' antiheroes the position of an outside and naive spectator, as exemplified by the title character of Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen's *Der abenteuerliche Simplicissimus* (1668), who also travels around and, incidentally, reaches the Einsiedeln monastery, which was not only a pilgrimage site itself, but also a station on the Way of St. James.

Even more problematic is the fact that one of the episodes features the Marquis de Sade, a militant atheist, while at the car wreck, Jean and Pierre meet a mysterious young man who is obviously Satan himself: For one thing, the youth reveals himself to be the leader of the evil spirits and damned souls by the reproduction of the heretical *apokatástasis* doctrine. In addition, the surprising fulfillment of Jean's wish that the driver, who refused them a ride, might have an accident, can be attributed to the stranger. This is suggested not least by the fact that he removes the plaque of St. Christopher, the patron saint of travellers, who has failed here, from the dashboard of the crashed car and sinks it into the mud (Leisch-

Kiesl/Sauer 2005, 263). Although the man has bare feet, like the title character of *Simón del desierto*, he treads with them on the same spot, similar to the young dancers in this movie's underworld. Finally, the act of handing over the dead driver's shoes to Pierre can be seen as doubly diabolical, for although the vagrant is pleased about the expected alleviation of the pain in his feet, this runs counter to the self-punishment function of pilgrimage. At the same time, the driver's elegant shoes will certainly prove to be as uncomfortable as Pierre's old ones.

In the same scene, the devil himself is no less independent of physical motion than in *Simón del desierto*, as he suddenly sits inside the crashed car and then just as suddenly leans against its mud-guard. But just as walking, in the former film, eluded an unambiguous attribution to God or Satan, the supernatural translocations now prove to be ambivalent: Although the two vagabonds at the beginning of *La Voie lactée* encounter God the Father in the shape of a walking man who lets the Holy Spirit ascend into heaven as a dove, the Son of God and also later the Virgin Mary suddenly emerge from nowhere, while a priest inexplicably enters the interior of two locked rooms in a guest house.

Similar to *Simón del desierto*, *La Voie lactée* not only defies the laws of space, but also those of time. Like the flight to New York, the walk to Santiago de Compostela is also a journey through time, because the embedded narratives return from the present in the story's framework to the early modern period, the Middle Ages and antiquity (Colina/Turrent 1992, 183; Oms 1985, 150; Carreras-Kuntz 2004, 68; Christie 2004, 137; Leisch-Kiesl/Sauer 2005, 255). This permeability of temporal levels becomes particularly clear in a later passage of the film which introduces two other men besides the two beggars, who alter their identities by appearing as smugglers and hunters in the present, but as Protestant students in the past (Leisch-Kiesl/Sauer 2005, 265).

At the end of the film, even the initial explanation of the pilgrimage destination is replaced by a different one. At their arrival in Santiago de Compostela, Jean and Pierre learn from the street-walker that it is not James, but rather, Priscillian, who is buried in the cathedral – a hypothesis that is actually discussed by historians (Leisch-Kiesl/Sauer 2005, 255, 268). Once again, a further sexual degradation of Christian walking is achieved, because Buñuel's

film had previously made clear that this theologian of the 4th century was the first heretic in history. Priscillian taught that one must free the good soul from the evil body by humiliating the latter through sensual pleasures (Capriles 1978, 311; Leisch-Kiesl/Sauer 2005, 260–261). Now, Jean and Pierre, whose journey to the Spanish city had already been motivated solely by the hope of meeting as many pilgrims as possible there who would make begging particularly profitable, are going to have sexual intercourse with the prostitute, which not only fulfils the mysterious divine mandate given to them at the beginning of the film, but also corresponds to Priscillian's heretical teachings.

### **A stumbling itinerant preacher in the footsteps of Jesus**

Similar to *La Voie lactée*, *Nazarín* also refers to Jesus, who now no longer appears in the flesh, but rather serves the title character, a priest, as a model for literal imitation (Mertens 1999, 206, 210–211). This analogy, which is already alluded to by the phonetic similarity between 'Nazarín' and 'Nazareth' (Leisch-Kiesl/Sauer 2005, 231), also includes other characters, since Nazarín's companions, Beatriz and Andara, can be compared with the Mother Mary and Mary Magdalene or with the latter and Peter, while the other clerics correspond to the Pharisees (Colina/Turrent 1992, 132; Mertens 1999, 206). It likewise concerns Nazarín's various experiences: Just as the priest is regarded as a miracle healer and saint following the recovery of Beatriz's niece, Jesus also accomplished miracle healings (Durgnat 1977, 109). Nazarín's later arrest in a garden reminds us of the biblical Mount of Olives scene (Leisch-Kiesl/Sauer 2005, 229). And in prison, Nazarín is situated between an evil and a 'good' criminal just as Jesus was at his crucifixion (Durgnat 1977, 109; Edwards 1982, 131).

Most importantly, after the first third of the film, which takes place in the socially restless Mexico of the late 19th century, Nazarín sets off on a walk across the country as a dedication to God (Kotulla 1968, 414). In so doing, he becomes one of those begging itinerant preachers who appeared again and again – especially in social crisis situations – up to the 19th century. In fact, Jesus, too, in addition to reputedly walking over water and carrying the cross on foot, belonged to those numerous Jewish travelling preachers who, during his time, toured Palestine without possessions. And even though he

seems to have avoided Roman and Hellenized cities in favor of the free country, he nevertheless travelled in an area that spanned 120 miles in a north-south direction and reached as far as Jerusalem. On his journeys, he additionally called on twelve disciples to wander throughout the land and preach about the kingdom of God.<sup>3</sup> (Amato 2004, 45)

Like Simón, Nazarín is at first barefoot on the way, having given his shoes to a poor man right at the beginning, but later, much like Pierre in *La Voie lactée*, receives a pair from Beatriz. This makes an implicit reference to one of Jesus's parables about journeying, namely, that of the prodigal son (Luke 5, 22). However, one of the women who believe he has supernatural powers explicitly compares Nazarín again with Jesus due to his barefoot state (Leisch-Kiesl/Sauer 2005, 228).

Nevertheless, Buñuel's priest remains separated from the Son of God by such weighty differences that, in the end, his imitation of Jesus also amounts to nothing more than a parody. As Jesus voluntarily set out on his journeys and gathered disciples around him, other travelling preachers were not always dismissed as lunatics but, due to their rhetorical charisma, sometimes well received by simple people. By comparison, Nazarín's actions are determined by outside forces and lacking success: Just as in *La Voie lactée*, external circumstances compel Jean and Pierre to advance on foot, Nazarín initially flees from an impending suspension and is eventually led away by the police (Leisch-Kiesl/Sauer 2005, 225, 227–228). Moreover, he is accompanied against his will by two women who follow him presumably because of his Christianity, but actually out of a quite sensual affection, and whom he eventually loses again. The loss of Beatriz to Pinto is emphasized by a formal parallel, since she first lays her head on Nazarín's shoulder, but then on Pinto's. At the same time, the act of walking is again contrasted with that of being transported, as the girl was once on foot with the priest and is now sitting on a horse-drawn carriage with her brutal lover. Finally, as Amedée Ayfre once remarked with a view to Buñuel's film, Christ suffered the death on the cross, but subsequently experienced his resurrection (Ayfre 1962–63, 54). This grace is denied to the priest, which is underscored by the reference to another form of Christian walking, for *Nazarín* also ends with the drumming of Calanda's Good Friday procession and, thus, without resurrection (Carreras-

Kuntz 2004, 67–68). If we add that Nazarín is described by another priest along the way as a “hereje,” it becomes clear that his wandering ultimately expresses his social homelessness (Colina/Turrent 1992, 178; Leisch-Kiesl/Sauer 2005, 233).

This homelessness is also emphasized by a double reference to the picaresque novel. First, the movie *Nazarín* is likewise structured episodically, and its protagonist, like the picaresque novel's anti-hero, is surrounded by socially marginalized characters, but at the same time comes into contact with different social strata (Edwards 1982, 117, 135). Second, Nazarín is also a fool as his failure – and this is particularly evident from the episode at the construction site – is caused by his orientation towards an abstract morality that is completely inappropriate within the social reality (Mertens 1999, 214–215; Leisch-Kiesl/Sauer 2005, 232). In this context, Buñuel himself and many commentators following him have compared Nazarín with the title character of Miguel de Cervantes's partially picaresque novel *Don Quichote* (1605–15) (Colina/Turrent 1992, 132; Kotulla 1968, 410; Edwards 1982, 117–118; Oms 1985, 143–144; Carreras-Kuntz 2004, 67; Christie 2004, 133, 137; Leisch-Kiesl/Sauer 2005, 231). However, what has not been discussed so far is not only that this reference to a worldly model profanes the original spiritual one, Jesus, but additionally, the knight himself is degraded by the walking priest, who symbolically pulls him down from his horse.

### **A worn-out Jesus and two hesitant blind men**

While the profanation of Jesus's journeys is conveyed by the title character in *Nazarín*, this detour is dispensed with in the film *La Voie lactée*. For although the latter's narrative framework has Jesus appearing supernaturally out of nowhere, one of the embedded narratives presents him moving around in a natural way. *La Voie lactée* certainly reproduces some clichés of the traditional Jesus iconography (Leisch-Kiesl/Sauer 2005, 270). According to Buñuel, however, the main focus for him was to depict this figure as an ordinary person, contrary to his usual mystification, by, among other things, showing him “running” and “mistaking his way” (Buñuel 1994, 245). Thus, in the finished film, a waiter in a fine restaurant questions the typical representation of Christ as always pacing in a solemn, dignified way, whereupon in a further metadiegesis it can be seen how Jesus arrives late, and therefore in a hurried running

pace, on the way to the wedding of Cana at the meeting point with his disciples.

In contrast, the end of *La Voie lactée* does not demystify the Son of God by means of acceleration, but through the arrest of a walking movement; and this refers back to Simón's fixation on his column, with which this article began. Shortly after having linked walking to seeing by identifying the camera with the vagrants, *La Voie lactée* allows two blind people to appear on the scene, walking with canes. Just as Jesus made the blind see and the lame walk in his biblical miraculous healings, he apparently also heals the two men from their blindness in Buñuel's film. The men are initially delighted about this, but, when trying to follow Jesus and the apostles just a moment later, are held back by a narrow trench, which they insecurely tap with their still-needed canes. And while one finally crosses the chasm, the other is afraid to proceed. This scene is of an enigmatic surrealist quality, which is why it has provoked many different interpretations. Most convincing of these, however, is the thesis put forward by Oswaldo Capriles that the miracle cure did not really come about, but was merely imagined on the basis of a "dogma as opposed to reality" (Capriles 1978, 312–313). In any case, the two men are separated by the fissure of the earth – confirming Jesus's previous explanation that he did not want to bring peace to mankind, but rather, to divide it.

### Conclusion

This essay has demonstrated that Buñuel's films deal with several forms of Christian peregrination. The most important among them are pilgrimage and the itinerant preacher, both of which are represented by exceptionally prominent examples, namely, Simeon the stylite and Santiago de Compostela in the one case and Jesus Christ in the other. In both contexts, walking as man's natural form of horizontal translocation is related to vertical, artificial, and supernatural modes of locomotion. Although moving on foot is characterized, in typical Christian fashion, as an arduous, humble, ascetic or even self-punishing activity, it gives rise to some of the most impressive images in Buñuel's body of work and is exploited for specific surrealist ends: It is eroticized, associated with supernaturally overcoming the restrictions of space and time, and subjected to carnivalesque, ambivalent profanations:

On the one hand, religious walking does not only degrade chivalric riding, but is itself subverted by way of heresies, anticlericalism, demystification, secularization, and atheism. Particularly in the case of pilgrimage, this subversion is already interesting in itself. With the advent of inner pioussness, pilgrimage was criticized for tying God, an immaterial and ubiquitous being, to individual geographical places, which were thus sanctified but also inversely profaned God (Hassauer 2000, 637–638), whereas today, the popularity of certain places of pilgrimage, such as Lourdes, is used to ward off the general secularization that has seized Western societies (Coleman 2015, 58). In addition, Buñuel manages to profane sacred walking in contradictory ways, namely, by presenting it as being either involuntary or joyful and either accelerated or stopped. These profanations are insistently reinforced by establishing intertextual relations to the picaresque novel with its digressive narratives regarding naive antiheroes during their mundane travels. On the other hand, the fact that Buñuel devoted entire films to the subject of Christian wandering points to his sustained fascination with this phenomenon, which for him was ambiguous insofar as *all* kinds of spatial and temporal movement were accessible to both God and Satan.

Now, the connection Buñuel made between human walking and the movements of these supernatural beings even allows us to surpass the current state of pilgrimage research in religious studies. For while it is pointed out here that pilgrimage, when practiced on foot, nowadays also serves to counteract society's general acceleration (Coleman 2015, 58), it has been overlooked so far that Marian and other supernatural apparitions, whose sites often become pilgrim destinations (Sigal 2005, 7148; Turner 2005, 7146), themselves represent instantaneous and thus hyper-fast motions. A further engagement with Buñuel's cinematic work would offer the chance to explore this surprising parallel between traditional religious beliefs and current social developments.

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### Notes

- 1 *Nazarín* received the International Prize at the Cannes festival, *Simón del desierto* the Special Jury Prize at the Venice festival and *La Voie lactée* the Interfilm Award at the Berlin festival.
- 2 All quotes without indication of source like this one are taken from the respective movie under discussion.
- 3 When *Nazarín* imitates Jesus as a wandering preacher, spatial locomotion is, in a certain way, again combined with a journey back in time to antiquity.