

How do the grotesque elements of Buñuel's *Viridiana* contribute to the subversion of Francoist values in the film?

The film *Viridiana* (1961), by Luis Buñuel, is described as ‘un claro exponente del cine más alejado del Régimen’¹; that is to say, the Francoist regime which governed Spain at the time of the film’s release. Indeed, the film was immediately banned in the country after its first appearance at the Cannes film festival in 1961 for blasphemy against the Catholic Church. Given that the values of Franco’s government of the period were so intertwined with those of Catholicism, we can argue that *Viridiana* not only criticised various Catholicism ideals, but also those of the dictatorship. This essay will discuss how various grotesque elements of the film contribute to the subversion of Francoist values. We will examine what exactly “the grotesque” signifies, before discussing the various ideological principles of the dictatorship and concluding with a deeper analysis of how these are criticised by the grotesque portrayal of different characters and symbols within the film.

First, we must define the meaning of “grotesque” in the specific context of *Viridiana*. Given that Harpham admits that ‘the grotesque is the slipperiest of aesthetic categories’², various definitions and perceptions for the word and its depiction exist. In this example, we will define the grotesque as something which provokes feelings of strangeness, when ‘the familiar and commonplace [are]...suddenly subverted or undermined by the uncanny or the alien’³. In other words, *Viridiana* contains realistic elements that are familiar to the viewer, but the conventionality of these elements is shattered through their grotesque portrayal. Employing this aesthetic serves to play not only on physical representations of absurdity and deformity, but also through distorting the commonplace normalities of everyday existence.

Although the grotesque challenges our beliefs in society and reality, it does not go so far as to destroy them completely, as this would defeat the purpose of its dramatic application. Instead, Harpham quotes Wolfgang Kayser as saying the grotesque ‘instils fear of life rather than fear of death’⁴. The viewer consequently develops a new understanding of their reality – in this case, a critical understanding of the ugly truth of Francoist values – through the

¹ Virginia Sánchez Rodríguez, ‘La función ideológica de la música en el cine español del franquismo’, *Opción: Revista de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales*, 31(2015), 884-905

<<https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=31045569052>> [Accessed 08 May 2022] (p.889).

² Geoffrey Harpham, ‘The Grotesque: First Principles’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 34(1976), 461-468 < <https://www.jstor.org/stable/430580> > [Accessed 08 May 2022] (p.461).

³ *Ibid.*, p.462.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.462.

representation of these distorted conventional perspectives. Lastly, for a work to be seen as grotesque, it must provoke at least one of three responses: laughter, astonishment, and either disgust or horror.⁵ We will analyse how various aspects of *Viridiana* effectively arouse a combination of these three responses.

Moreover, Harpham argues that the grotesque aesthetic demonstrates ‘in eras of upheaval or crisis... that the rules of order have collapsed’⁶. *Viridiana* was released during a period when ‘el Gobierno español pugnaba por fraguarse una imagen política de mayor liberalismo y tolerancia’⁷ in comparison to the strict Catholic and conservative dictatorship which ruled a suffering Spanish population through fear and violence just twenty years earlier. Some examples of these economic and more liberal changes include rural to urban migration, labour emigration from Spain to abroad, population growth, a massive increase in tourism to the country and a resultant consumerist society from the growth in economic power⁸.

However, while the Francoist government was attempting to portray a more liberal image to the rest of the world, the Spanish population was still ‘inmerso en un mundo conformado por los mismos esquemas y parecidas dinámicas de los años cuarenta’⁹. Bentley reminds us of the three main pillars encompassing the Francoist government's values: ‘Faith, Fatherland and Family’¹⁰. This remained the case in 1961 when *Viridiana* was released. Given that the film was banned in Spain almost immediately due to its perceived criticism of the Church, it is evident that the dictatorship was still dedicated to upholding these ideals. Therefore, the use of the grotesque, which is most effective when ‘old beliefs in old orders are threatened’¹¹, is particularly powerful in the film, as Buñuel is criticising the values of the Spanish government at a key moment of the country’s ‘desarrollo industrial’¹².

We will now identify how *Viridiana* can be ‘read as the study of the repressive forces of extreme Catholicism’¹³, and thus as a criticism of these Francoist values, through an initial analysis of the characterisation of the film’s protagonist: Viridiana herself. The viewer is first introduced to the convent as an enclosed, white, and clinical environment, with the nuns dressed in habits and veils. This setting reinforces the idea of separation from the reality of the

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.463.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.466.

⁷ Vicente Sánchez-Biosca, *Viridiana/Luis Buñuel; estudio crítico*, (Barcelona: Ediciones Paidós, 1999), p.21.

⁸ Sánchez Rodríguez, p.886.

⁹ Jordi Gracia García and Miguel Ángel Ruiz Carnicer, *La España de Franco, 1939-1975: cultura y vida cotidiana* (Madrid: Editorial Síntesis, 2001), p.283.

¹⁰ Bernard P. E. Bentley, *A companion to Spanish cinema* (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2008), p.87.

¹¹ Harpham, p.466.

¹² Sánchez-Biosca, p.21.

¹³ Bentley, pp.151-152.

outside world and the inflexible repetition and formality of religion.¹⁴ In the beginning, Viridiana is portrayed as pious and devout, yet ‘que nada sabe del mundo, de sus tentaciones ni sus placeres’¹⁵. Here, it can be argued that Buñuel is demonstrating the futility and hypocrisy of religious practices through the extreme example of Viridiana’s character – by choosing to become a nun and opting for isolation, she is effectively shunning the outside world, turning her back on the real problems faced by ordinary people.¹⁶

Despite her uncle’s failing health, Viridiana ‘preferiría no salir del convento’¹⁷ to visit him and is indifferent to the fact she will never see him again. This provokes surprise within the viewer, as such behaviour goes against the typical Christian morals of goodness and kindness. Indeed, her Mother Superior is also surprised at this response, but nevertheless persuades Viridiana to go and visit Don Jaime. However, it is important to note that the Mother Superior uses the argument that going to visit her uncle is the “right” thing to do, rather than an action motivated by genuine religious principles. This scene lays the groundwork for the subversion of Catholicism within the film, criticising the falsity and hypocrisy of the institution and undermining the conventional perception of the faith.

The grotesque elements of the film are further demonstrated through Buñuel’s portrayal of Viridiana during her first night on the estate. The camera shows her undressing, with her hair unbound for the first time, and with a focus on her bare legs (00:06:16). The viewer feels uncomfortable, as the chastity of a novice nun is being perversely sexualised and displayed. This feeling is amplified thanks to the actions of Ramona, Don Jaime’s servant woman, peeping through the keyhole at the moment we know Viridiana is in a state of undress. Yet at the same time, Viridiana’s extreme Catholic devotion is represented through the evidence of her personal possessions, laid out before her when she is praying: a wooden cross; a crown of thorns; nails and a sponge. She also makes up her bed on the hard floor and sleeps in a rough nightgown, representing not only the suffering that is justified through religion, but also the harmful, damaging nature of sexual repression.¹⁸ Although this is perhaps an expected, conventional image of a novice and her religious belongings, the juxtaposition of these two extreme sides of her character’s portrayal is the first example of the ‘la seducción y perversion del catolicismo’¹⁹

¹⁴ Gwynne Edwards, *The discreet art of Luis Buñuel: a reading of his films* (London: Boyars, 1982), p.146.

¹⁵ Sánchez-Biosca, p.34.

¹⁶ Gwynne Edwards, *A companion to Luis Buñuel* (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2005), p.138.

¹⁷ *Viridiana (1961)*, dir. by Luis Buñuel, (Arrow Films, 2006) [on DVD], 00:02:18. Further references to this film are given in the text.

¹⁸ Edwards, *The Discreet*, p.148.

¹⁹ Sánchez-Biosca, p.53.

which is pervasive throughout the film and provokes feelings of strangeness within the viewer. The continued grotesque theme of Viridiana's innocence and virginity being nevertheless represented erotically suggests that such divine purity is impossible in the face of 'la sordidez del realismo'²⁰.

Viridiana's characterisation and this continued idea of 'inocencia sometida a una mirada perversa'²¹ are further reinforced through her interactions with Don Jaime and other members of his household. We discover that her dislike of her uncle is partly due to the fact he had an illegitimate son, Jorge, whom he abandoned. We can see how this serves to represent the Church's position on sexual relations outside of marriage, however Viridiana's lack of understanding of the unfortunate realities of life is summed up in Don Jaime's '¿pero qué sabes tú de la vida?' (00:09:50). The absence of her forgiveness again shows her behaviour opposing "true" Christian morals, reinforcing this idea of the hollowness of the religious institution and therefore subverting its values. Furthermore, in the scene where she is invited to milk the cows by Mancho (00:08:14), the caretaker of the estate, the sexual allusion created by the udder, teats and milking movement alongside her innocent white hand is evident to us, even though Viridiana herself is unable to immediately identify the source of her aversion.²² Her constant desire for purity can be further identified through the scene where she joins in skipping with Rita, Ramona's young daughter, whose character is representative of youth, innocence and therefore sexual immaturity.²³ With these examples, we can identify how Buñuel's continued grotesque erotic representation of innocence subverts the Catholic values of purity, provoking horror within the viewer and leading us to question if the pursuit of such ideals can ever be attained when faced with the reality of our flawed, perverse, altogether human, society.

We shall now analyse how Francoist values are subverted through the grotesque portrayal and actions of Don Jaime. Buñuel uses this character to demonstrate 'the failure of old Spanish dogmatism'²⁴; a failure of the Francoist values of family, faith and fatherland. A member of the bourgeoisie, undoubtedly a Catholic, he has nevertheless let his old grand estate fall into ruin. We can interpret this ruined house as a metaphor for the struggling state of Spain and the ineffectiveness of clinging to the old traditions. Furthermore, the absence of Don Jaime

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.35.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.57.

²² Robert G. Harvard, 'Luis Buñuel: Objects and Phantoms. The Montage of Viridiana' in *Luis Buñuel: A Symposium*, ed. by Margaret A. Rees, (Leeds: Trinity and All Saints' College, 1983), pp. 59-88 (p.65).

²³ Edwards, *The Discreet Art*, p.147.

²⁴ Emilio G. Riera, 'Viridiana', in *The World of Luis Buñuel: essays in criticism*, ed. by Joan Mellen, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 218-225 (p.222).

as a father figure to both his son and Viridiana undermines the Francoist idealisation of the nuclear family.

The viewer's introduction to the character of Don Jaime also introduces us to what will become a repeated fetishism of feet that is present throughout the film. The camera first focuses on the skipping movement of Rita's legs, her bare feet visible. The image slowly moves to Don Jaime, who is watching the innocent young girl with an uncomfortable fascination. The skipping rope itself is a recurring motif of the film, first as a symbol of joyful childhood innocence – as demonstrated by Rita and Viridiana – however, Don Jaime's unnatural interest in their skipping as well as its undoubtedly phallic handles is another example of the film's sexualisation of innocence. However, the grotesque element of Don Jaime's character is revealed through his religious obsession with his dead wife, who died of a heart attack on their wedding night and whom Viridiana uncannily resembles – 'cómo te pareces a tu tía' (00:05:11). The scene of Don Jaime's transvestism (00:10:43), slipping his feet into his dead wife's shoes and wrapping her corset around his waist, is akin to that of a religious, reverential ceremony, which, like the spirit of Spanish Catholicism, has been nurtured on the pursuit of death due to the impossibility of attaining the ideal – that is, his wife – in life.²⁵ The resulting subversion of religious values and distortion of convention through this comparison again provoke sentiments of discomfort within the viewer.

The sacred institution of marriage, church and conventional family is further grotesquely subverted through the awakening of Don Jaime's sexual feelings towards his niece, who embodies the 'alluring, living form of his erotic fantasies of his dead wife'²⁶. The grotesque aesthetic and subversion of family values are reinforced in the scene where Viridiana is dressed in her aunt's wedding outfit and Don Jaime asks her to marry him. As a result of Viridiana's refusal, Ramona drugs her coffee and Don Jaime takes her to his room, positioning her on his bed in a death posture, her arms crossed over her chest. Viridiana is the living embodiment of Don Jaime's desire, yet her state of unconsciousness combined with her uncle's perception of her as his dead lover alludes to the theme of necrophilia and further suggests the impossibility of retaining a virginal purity in such a cruel and perverted reality.

The motif of the skipping rope reappears, now as an image of Don Jaime's sexual guilt, as it is the tool he uses to commit suicide after being unable to handle Viridiana's rejection and departure. The familiar symbol of innocent, simple childhood pleasure is grotesquely

²⁵ Riera, p.222.

²⁶ Edwards, *The Discreet*, p.148.

transformed into an instrument of death. Therefore, we can see how Buñuel uses the character of Don Jaime and his twisted obsessions to represent ‘una forma de destrucción del mundo burgués, es decir, del buen gusto y de sus pilares básicos, la familia y la religión’²⁷. Buñuel suggests that these institutions and their extreme values are what provoke such sinful, carnal and altogether horrifically human desires. We see how the interests of the Francoist Church and the Spanish bourgeoisie class are interlinked, creating a predatory, stagnant state of government which is complicit in ruling an oppressed society. Through these various grotesque examples of Don Jaime’s characterisation, the power of the aristocratic bourgeoisie and the core values of Francoism are subverted.

Don Jaime’s suicide is a key turning point in the film’s plot. Viridiana, trapped by her feelings of guilt, decides to dedicate herself to Christ through charitable acts and brings a band of physically and morally repulsive beggars to live on the estate²⁸ with the pious intention of saving their souls. Forced into the outside world, she is attempting to transform it using convent values. Viridiana is described as ‘buena’ (00:41:00), however, she is also a simpleton (00:41:03). Although Viridiana’s motives are undoubtedly good and her religious morals unquestionable, the beggars repay her with selfishness and violence, taking advantage of her charity with false gratitude. Her actions are an embodied example of the ‘essential absurdity of...misguided charity’²⁹ which does nothing to improve the harsh cruelty of human reality. The film suggests that, in an imperfect world where ‘selfishness, greed, anger and lust are ever present, compassion and charity merely feed those moral flaws’³⁰, creating ironically distorted and contradictory values of Catholicism. The Francoist values are therefore criticised through this depiction of their ineffectiveness and futility in the face of reality.

The film continually subverts Francoist values through the grotesque elements of the characterisation and actions of the beggars. Arguably, the group of ‘pobres’ (00:41:43) represent ‘una microsociedad en cuyo interior todas las funciones sociales...están representadas, todos los esquemas de la jerarquía, todos los vicios y defectos’³¹. For example, the blind man Don Amalio is at the top of the hierarchy, while the Leper is treated with disgust and scorn even by the other beggars. The grotesque aesthetic is evident here in their physical features, linking the idea of sin with external ugliness. Yet Buñuel does not show the beggars

²⁷ Sánchez-Biosca, p.52.

²⁸ Tom Conley, ‘Viridiana Coca-Cola (Luis Buñuel, 1961)’, in *Burning Darkness: a half century of Spanish cinema*, ed. by Joan Ramon Resina, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), pp. 43-60 (p.48).

²⁹ Riera, p.222.

³⁰ Edwards, *A companion*, p.141.

³¹ Sánchez-Biosca, p.45.

in a way which evokes pity within the viewer, as perhaps would be expected in a Christian portrayal. Rather, the harsh cruelties and realities of life are shown in this microcosm of humanity – the beggars are capable of comradeship, but they are also proud, intolerable of charity, jealous of one another and inclined to the worst cruelty of violence, rape and even murder.³² Unfortunately, Viridiana's well-intentioned actions only result in the full disintegration of conventional social order and values, as we see when the beggars are left alone.

Ultimately, the futility of Christian charity is demonstrated in the final scenes of the film. Such actions 'no regla nada' (00:55:30), as human suffering is perpetual and, in any case, the beggars do not want to be saved. Despite the kindness Viridiana has shown them, the beggars break into the house and have a drunken, depraved parody of a bourgeoisie dinner party. The scene culminates in an orgy, with the group posing in a hideous mockery of da Vinci's *The Last Supper* (01:12:56), Handel's *Messiah* plays in the background while some of the party dance, the Leper dresses up in the wedding dress of Don Jaime's dead wife, one of the women is raped by another beggar and Don Amalio smashes up the dinner table with his stick in a drunken rage. Elements of the grotesque are evident here, as the portrayal of conventionally holy music and well-known religious imagery is juxtaposed with such baseless depravity of the worst aspects of humanity in a way that provokes horror and disgust within the viewer.

We see a final example of the mindless violation of innocence in the scene where the beggar El Cojo's attempt to rape Viridiana on her return to the house. The motif of the skipping rope reappears, having grotesquely evolved from a mere symbol of childhood innocence, to one of death and finally one interlinked with violent sexual actions, as it is now being used as a belt by El Cojo. This theme is reinforced by the image of pure and chaste Viridiana pulling helplessly on the aforementioned phallic handles. In the end, she is saved by Jorge's pragmatism, as he manipulates the Leper into killing El Cojo by appealing to his self-interest and greed, instead of to his better nature. It is suggested that, in the brutal reality of our world, pragmatism – not goodness – is what survives. The grotesque elements of this scene therefore force the reader to confront the horrific truth of human nature in a savage and ungrateful world; goodness, piety and charity will always be either rejected or corrupted.

In conclusion, there are various ways in which the grotesque elements of Buñuel's *Viridiana* contribute to the subversion of Francoist values of faith, family and fatherhood that

³² Harvard, p.81.

were prevalent in Spain during this period. The use of the grotesque aesthetic to criticise the government was even more powerful given that the film's release occurred during a turning point in Spain's economic and liberal development. We have analysed how the portrayal of different symbols as well as of different characters and their actions provoke feelings of strangeness, astonishment, horror and disgust within the viewer through the distortion of everyday realistic normalities. With *Viridiana*, Buñuel demonstrates the repressive character and hypocrisy of Catholicism and its powerlessness in the face of the brutal nature of humanity; in fact, the repressive nature of the Church only serves to contribute to society's immorality and sin. Overall, by extension, Buñuel therefore criticises and subverts the ineffective reality of the values idealised by the Francoist government: they are unattainable and attempting to pursue them can only lead to catastrophe.

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