

Andrew Sarris died in June 2012. He was an early friend of *Movie* whose contributions included the work on *Viridiana* that appeared in the magazine's first number. We republish the article now in tribute to a vital critical pioneer.



The Devil and the Nun

When Luis Bunuel's *Viridiana* finally materialised in the dreary twilight of the 1961 Cannes Film Festival, many of those present were surprised to discover not merely a great film but, indeed, a really good movie. Some of the more modern critics still rotating around the Resnais-Antonioni axis were a bit suspicious of Bunuel's archaic technique, and the Festival Jury hedged its bets by jointly honouring Bunuel's rousing entertainment in *Viridiana* and Henri Colpi's tedious coupling of amnesia and ambiguity in *Une Aussi Longue Absence*. For once, the international box-office barometer has more accurately recorded the relative merits of the two works. Of course, every film is liked and disliked both for right and wrong reasons, and *Viridiana* is particularly susceptible to partisan critiques. Bunuel's personal triumph has been used to chastise everything from *Marienbad* to the Vatican, with the predictable counter-reactions. However, when one attempts to place Bunuel in apposition or opposition to other directors, his remarkable isolation becomes apparent. On the most obvious level of identification, he is the only great Spanish-language director, and his career is one of the most bizarre in film history.

For a long time before *Viridiana*, Bunuel had been treated as a victim of the world's repressions and inhibitions, variously represented by French censorship, Spanish fascism, Hollywood commercialism and Mexican mediocrity. The Bunuel cult, at least in the Anglo-Saxon countries, had become an exercise less in cinema than in metacinema, that is, the study of cinema which might have or should have evolved under the proper social conditions. This cult assumed the mannerisms of privileged scholarship by exploiting the director's underground reputation as the creator of *Un Chien Andalou* (1928) and *L'Age d'Or* (1930), banned works carrying the cultural prestige of surrealism but generally unavailable to the lay public. Bunuel himself was gradually fossilised in the swamp of his legend by the reluctance of his defenders to confront the uneven quality of

his career as a whole. Consequently, many of us at Cannes had to readjust to a new conception of Bunuel as a master instead of a martyr. Realising that he had become a creature of festivals and film societies, and that his efforts held no interest for the distributors with the big cigars, most of us were quite willing to go along with the Bunuel clique in awarding him another sympathy prize as for *The Young One*. Then, almost miraculously, the old surrealist crossed everyone up with a resounding commercial success.

*Viridiana* has a plot which is almost too lurid to synthesise even in these enlightened times. The heroine is summoned from a convent by her uncle, Don Jaime, an old Spanish *hidalgo* living on a neglected estate (Spain?) in obsessive mourning for his dead wife (The Republic?). The novice arrives on the thirtieth anniversary of Don Jaime's marriage. *Viridiana's* resemblance to the *hidalgo's* wife introduces the theme of substitution so dear to Hitchcock, but Bunuel is less concerned with the illusion of the substitution than with the sexual drives aroused by it. Failing to persuade his niece to marry him, Don Jaime orders a compliant maid to drug her. He carries her upstairs to the accompaniment of *The Messiah*, while Bunuel intensifies the outrageous eroticism of the situation by photographing the choreography of abduction through the prying eyes of the maid's little girl. Almost inexplicably, Don Jaime desists from his attempted rape. The morning after, in progressive stages of desperation, he tells his outraged niece that she has been violated, then denies the violation, outraging her even more with his mendacity, and after watching her departure, hangs himself. *Viridiana* returns to atone for her guilt, and the second movement of the film begins with the maid's little girl skipping with the rope that has been the instrument of the *hidalgo's* deliverance.

The incestuous texture of the film is maintained with the entrance of the novice's virile cousin, Jorge, a pragmatist of the most ruthless kind. He discards his mistress to pursue

Viridiana more efficiently, but willingly seduces the adoring maid in the interim. While Jorge is patching up the estate in slapdash Spanish fashion, Viridiana is pursuing the Franciscan ethic by adopting the most revolting beggars in the area. Bunuel intercuts the Angelus recited by Viridiana and her scabrous flock with detail shots of Jorge's rebuilding. Bunuel's despair for Spain leads him to dismiss reform as a possibility; Jorge is moved by humane feelings to purchase a dog which is chained under a cart and forced to trot along at a horse's pace. No sooner is the 'liberal' purchase consummated, than another dog comes trotting by under another cart going in the opposite direction, reversing the pattern of futility, on the same Spanish road. The demolition of Viridiana's principles is reserved for the film's remarkable climax.

The beggars' orgy is set up dramatically by the departure of Viridiana, Jorge, the maid and her little girl on business in the town. For the first time the beggars move into the house itself, and assault every sacred feeling of property that any audience could be presumed to possess. Wine and food smear fancy tapestries, antique furniture is smashed, ornate dishes and glasses are broken. But unlike their colleagues in depravity from *La Dolce Vita*, the beggars enjoy themselves, and suddenly with *The Messiah* blaring on the gramophone, the screen reverberates with a hymn to liberation. These vile creatures (and Bunuel leaves no doubt of their vileness, their cruelty, even their mean hypocrisy), these blind, halt, leprous, syphilitic dregs become gloriously human.

When Viridiana and Jorge return, they are assaulted, and Viridiana's slowly vanishing purity is saved only when her cousin bribes one of the beggars to murder the would-be rapist. Deciding that two lives are too high a price to pay for her chastity, Viridiana casts her cross and her crown of thorns into the flames, and prepares to surrender to Jorge. The production's government supervisor, who must have been dozing until this point, finally intervened. Viridiana and Jorge must not be left alone in a room after this, he ordered. Bunuel dutifully complied with a *ménage-à-trois* ending in which Jorge, Viridiana and the maid play cards together in the long Spanish evening while the camera recedes on the hellish tableau to the accompaniment of some appropriate American juke box slop.

How Bunuel managed to realise *Viridiana* at all under the supervision of the Spanish censor may never be fully explained. The intangibles of national prestige may have played a part. Also, the myopic vision of the bureaucratic mind may not have fully grasped the almost magical transformation of images into ideas between shooting and screening. It would be naive to think that Bunuel was without guile in this undertaking. The deviousness of his subsequent interviews was worthy of Hitchcock, and there is enough ambiguity in the film itself to confound the most perverse critics. For example, there seems to be some controversy about the fate of the beleaguered heroine. To put it bluntly, is Viridiana, the chaste novice in the film, actually raped by the syphilitic beggar who murders her first attacker? If so, does she then renounce her vows of chastity as a result of a D. H. Lawrence awakening? The argument for this interpretation depends upon the time gap assumed in the editing of the action. The fact that Bunuel compels normally fastidious critics to ponder such lurid questions reflects the dark humour of his conceptions. And it is this dark humour which rescues Bunuel from the absurdities of Ichikawa.

Whether or not Bunuel has circumvented the censor with suggestive elisions, the plot of *Viridiana* gives one

pause. The modern cinema, such as it is presumed to be, is supposed to have supplanted plot with mood. Then suddenly, Bunuel bursts in like a resurrected Victorian novelist steeped in violent depravity and unashamedly flourishing the most obvious symbols. The spectacle of a contemporary director cutting away metaphorically from a brutal seduction to a cat pouncing on a mouse jolts the critic who has finally adjusted to the languorous introspection of an Antonioni. Then, too, the flagrant display of eroticism, sadism and fetishism reveals the director's personality with the embarrassing Krafft-Ebing frankness one recalls in the films of Stroheim and Lang. Bunuel may have been more shocking in the past, but never before have this shock effects seemed so much the warp and woof of his philosophy. *Un Chien Andalou* and *L'Age d'Or* have their moments, of course, but audiences are usually cushioned for 'avant-garde' cinema where anything goes. *Las Hurdes (Land Without Bread)* and *Los Olvidados* mask details of horror with a socially conscious narration. Even though it is hard to imagine any other director conceiving of a mountain goat falling off a mountain or a legless beggar being rolled down a hill, the spectator can console himself with the thought that this is not the best of all possible worlds, and that the next election or the next revolution may improve conditions. There is no such consolation in *Viridiana*, Bunuel's despairing allegory of the Spanish condition. For the first time in his career, Bunuel ends his action in an existential enclosure in which hell, in Sartre's phrase, is other people.

If every director must be assigned a political station, Bunuel is unmistakably a man of the left. He actively supported the Spanish Republic against Franco's insurgents, and he has been highly critical of the Establishments in Mexico, America and France. A story is told about Bunuel, perhaps apocryphal but still relevant. It seems that Jean Epstein, with whom Bunuel began his career in 1926, once offered his Spanish assistant an opportunity to work with Abel Gance. Bunuel reportedly refused because of what he considered Gance's fascist leanings. Epstein, a Gallic product of apolitical *amitié*, was outraged, but Bunuel stood his ground. Later, Bunuel had a falling out with Salvador Dali over the sacrilegious treatment of *L'Age d'Or*.

The point is the Bunuel has been more intransigent over the years than most of his colleagues, and he has had more than his share of problems, but where one sometimes suspects the temptation of martyrdom in a Stroheim or a Welles, one is struck mainly by Bunuel's tenacity. During the long drought between 1932 and 1947 without any directorial opportunities, he remained on the fringes of the industry in New York and Hollywood. Despite several cancelled projects in Mexico and France since 1947, he has managed to direct twenty films, about half of which are meaningful projections of his ideas and personality. Even in a potboiler like *Susana*, released in 1950, the year of *Los Olvidados*, there are one or two passages which foreshadow *Viridiana*.

There is a danger in attaching an explicitly political moral to Bunuel's career. For a director of the left, Bunuel has evidenced almost no interest in the mechanics of reform or revolution. The superimposed narrations in *Land Without Bread* and *Los Olvidados* suggest amelioration, but the images of the films operate autonomously in terms of a fatalistic Spanish temperament. Even in his Mexican films, there is no trace of the theory of progress through technology, and one could never imagine his making a tractor film behind the Iron Curtain. He has never concerned himself with the mystiques of peasant and worker; nor has he dramatised the injustices of economic exploitation in any detail. As the late André Bazin observed, Bunuel lacks the Manichean tenden-

cies of a propagandist. As cruel as his world may be, its characters are never divided into villains and victims. His obsession with mental and physical deformities generally deprives his plots of any sociological plausibility. Even his handling of the racial issue in *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Young One* is too perverse to serve as a respectably liberal blueprint.

Ado Kyrrou's recently published book on Bunuel sheds some new light on the paradoxes of the Director's personality. Particularly interesting is some of the director's own film criticism in the late twenties, when, like many critics today, he tried to establish polar relationships. Where Truffaut has invented the Lumiere-Delluc and Sagan-Queneau games, Bunuel pioneered in the Keaton-Jannings game. Bunuel preferred Keaton, with all the hostility to German expressionism such a preference implies. He frankly admired the American cinema for its empty-headed grace and rhythm, qualities which he attributed to a Jungian sense of racial instinct. Conversely, he understood his own limitations, and his perceptive humility is still one of his greatest virtues. Bunuel is not and never has been a stylist of the first rank. He would have been lost in the Hollywood shuffle on commissioned projects even though he functioned creditably and efficiently on impossible Mexican assignments. To Bunuel, the cinema is just a vehicle for his ideas. Once these ideas have taken the appropriately plastic form, he shoots very quickly, and any additional values are either incidental or accidental. One of his Mexican producers has reported that Bunuel seems bored by the actual shooting of a film.

Even though one may treat Dali's accusations of atheism as malicious slander to get Bunuel fired from the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Bunuel's film are clearly not intended to win friends and influence people for the Church. As a director who began his career by throwing live priests and dead jackasses out the window, and then compounding his sacrilege by confusing Christ with the Marquis de Sade, he has been almost exclusively identified in terms of these and subsequent impieties. By titillating anticlerical audiences with glimpses of forbidden frankness, Bunuel has found it difficult to convey the full dimensions of his metaphysical rebellion. As soon as he introduces the theme of sexual liberation into the argument, the latent puritanism of the organized left reacts against the degeneration of protest into anarchy. Yet even Bunuel's anarchy is unusually individualistic. Where Vigo is concerned with the disavowal and destruction of social institutions, Bunuel invokes the biological anarchy of nature to reconstruct humanity. Bunuel finds it quite natural for the protagonist of *El* to notice the legs of a pretty girl while he is washing a priest's feet for a Catholic ceremony. Bunuel's defiance of the Church for excluding nature from the altar thus takes on a mystical quality. the pleasure Bunuel takes in the beggar's orgy in *Viridiana* is almost indistinguishable from the religious ecstasy of self denial one finds in Bresson. It is perhaps appropriate that Bunuel lacks Bresson's sensibility while Bresson lacks Bunuel's force.

The odd circumstances of Bunuel's career preclude an analysis of periods and stylistic progression. More than most other directors of comparable stature, the man is inseparable from his art. His camera has always viewed his characters from a middle distance, too close for cosmic groupings and too far away for self-identification. Normally, this would make his films cold and his point of view detached, but by focusing on the abnormality of life, Bunuel forces his audience to accept man unconditionally. When we look at the monstrous long enough and hard

enough, we realise, in Truffaut's phrase, that there are no monsters. The drawback to Bunuel's choice of distance is that he creates horror without terror, and pity without catharsis. In short, he lacks the sense of tragedy his ideas demand.

How a director who seems so disconcertingly obvious can turn out to be so complex is one of the mysteries of the cinema. For example, it seems too symmetrically ironic to synchronise a beggar's orgy with Handel's *Messiah*. However, Bunuel has never been a champion of background music. He simply does not care enough about his score to seek something more subtle. Yet, his indifference to details that cleverer directors have mastered only reminds us that ingenuity is no substitute for genius. Bunuel's blend of the real and the surreal, the grotesque and the erotic, the scabrous and the sublime never quite fits into any critical theory. The triumph of *Viridiana* leaves us just about where we were before, but henceforth we shall have to allow Bunuel to tailor his own strait-jacket.

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*Movie*, 1, 1962.

[\*Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism\*](#), 4, 2013