

Those Obscure Objects of Desire in Luis Buñuel's Spanish Films: *Viridiana* and *Tristana*

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This essay examines the representations of the female protagonists in Buñuel's Spanish films: *Viridiana*, made in 1961, and *Tristana*, released ten years later. Both films depict the lives of young women within the rigid social parameters of twentieth-century provincial Spain. Like the bulk of the films that Buñuel made in Mexico, they present relatively conventional narratives with well-structured and coherent plots. Not surprisingly, neither work lacks elements of what has come to be recognized as Buñuel's particular brand of surrealism. These surrealist elements are typically presented through dream sequences, illogical images, the omnipresent force of chance, the theme of mad love, the *femme-enfant* character, and the depiction of screen violence, particularly sexual violence against women.

Since *Tristana* and *Viridiana* were the only films Buñuel directed in his native country after his definitive exile in 1934, many analyses of these films highlight what is perceived as the filmmaker's "rediscovered Spanishness." This category of commentary may point out, for example, the implicit criticism of the Spanish Catholic Church in *Viridiana* and the portrayal in *Tristana* of the historical conflict between liberals and conservatives on the eve of the Spanish Civil War. Both films are also closely related to Spanish literary history: *Tristana* is a relatively faithful cinematic adaptation of the 1892 novel by Spanish novelist Benito Pérez Galdós, whose *Nazarín* (1895) had also been adapted for the cinema by Buñuel in Mexico. *Viridiana*, although never acknowledged as such by the director, is almost certainly a reference to the female protagonist of another Galdós novel, *Halma*. Numerous literary and film scholars have studied the similarities and differences between Galdós's nineteenth-century novels and Buñuel's cinematic adaptation of them.¹

Another common place in Buñuel criticism related to these films has been the feminist theme in *Tristana*, whose male protagonist Don Lope often voices his purported support for women's liberation as part of his general liberal ideology. *Tristana* has thus been classified as a feminist

heroine and the film is, according to Beth Miller, a "condemnation of women's victimization by the bourgeois patriarchy" (359).

The question of whether or not a "feminist" viewpoint may be attributed to Buñuel, or even Galdós, however, is not a concern here. The present analysis will address neither the Galdós-Buñuel relationship nor the question of literary adaptations in the cinema. I focus on two problems that have not been widely commented upon with respect to either film. First, I consider how the cinematically specific acts of "performing" and "looking" are foregrounded in the films as an indicator of sexual power and privilege. It is through the complicated play of gazes that each protagonist is shown to have been relatively empowered or undermined in her claim to autonomy from the male characters, who are cast as agents of society's generalized oppression of women. Second, I examine the depiction of women's oppression itself in the films. In particular, I argue that male coercion of women and sexual violence against women are the central narrative motivations in each film. It is their own experience of victimization that provokes the transformations that both protagonists undergo in the course of the narratives.

In both *Tristana* and *Viridiana*, the protagonists' movements between the dual textual spaces of the female realm of the provincial home or convent on the one hand, and the external world of patriarchal social relations on the other, are motivated by specific narrative events which have profound consequences for the women's self-perception, as well as for their exterior projection, or screen image. These narrative events include, in the case of *Viridiana*, rape, and in *Tristana*, seduction. In each film, the protagonists' transformations are signaled by their *looks*. Here, both the transitive and intransitive meanings of the word apply: that is, their physical appearance, or how they are viewed by the other characters and the spectators, and conversely, the way they ultimately appropriate the power of a gaze for their own purposes.

The "Looks" of the Protagonists

In order to proceed with a discussion of the protagonists' *looks* in these two films, it will be helpful to pause and review the main points of the theoretical approach to feminist film analysis set forth by Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Mulvey argues that classical

(Hollywood) narrative film provides certain conditions for spectator pleasure, either by direct contemplation of the screen female or through identification with the gaze of the male protagonist. Women in classical narrative cinema are usually represented as passive objects of a male gaze. As signifiers of castration, they evoke the unconscious response mechanisms of voyeurism or fetishism in the male spectator, both of which serve as a defense against the threat. It follows that the female spectator must then opt either to identify with the female protagonist/object of the film, a posture that is considered to be masochistic, or to cross gender lines and identify with the gaze of the male protagonist.

Mulvey's theory, and many others which emphasize psychoanalytic processes in film reception, are helpful in understanding how films are conditioned by, and serve to perpetuate, paradigms of sexual demarcation in the society that produced them; particularly in the patriarchal world of the Hollywood film industry. As indicated earlier, Mulvey's psychoanalytic theory of film spectatorship has also, however, been the subject of much criticism and revision by feminist theorists and by the author herself, in part, because it does not take into account the variations in the generic and historical make-up of the film public, nor the specific problems posed by films which do not fall into the category of "classical narrative cinema."² According to Mulvey, this refers to a cinema that presents "a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic phantasy" (14).

It would be inaccurate to say that none of Buñuel's films fall into this category. Some films, particularly those that were made in the Mexican melodramatic genre, have much in common with the Hollywood movies that Mulvey describes. However, with respect to both *Viridiana* and *Tristana*, this is not the case. On the contrary, in these films the spectator is confronted with disruptions in the smooth flow of the narrative that inhibit the mechanisms of spectator pleasure characteristic of classical narrative film genres. Furthermore, in both of these films the act of looking is self-consciously foregrounded at the level of the film text itself. Both voyeurism and fetishism are overtly represented as part of the film's action and not subliminally inserted into the seamless narratives of Hollywood-style cinema. In *Viridiana* and *Tristana*, visual images specific to the film

medium, as opposed to the linguistic modes of signification in a work of literature, become the most important indicators of the interior psychology of the characters. Alterations in the protagonists' physical appearances and the way they view and are viewed by the other characters, reveal the subtle changes they undergo in the course of the narrative.

It is generally understood that the active agent of the gaze in the cinema, whether it be that of the characters, the spectator, or the original "eye" of the camera, assumes a measure of power over the object viewed and represents a "masculine" position, as opposed to the powerless and passive "feminine" position of "being looked at."³ This is not necessarily true because the gaze is literally borne by a male subject, the character or the director himself. Conversely, it is not always the case that the "feminine" position in the film is represented by a female character. Teresa de Laurentis distinguishes between a symbolic "Woman," as represented by the feminine position in the film, and historical "women," who are generally excluded as active subjects from film and literary discourse (35-36). Rather, the masculine and feminine positions are parts of socially constructed codes, in which, according to E. Ann Kaplan, "to own and activate the gaze, given our language and the structure of the unconscious, is to be in the masculine position" (30). In both *Viridiana* and *Tristana*, the female protagonists' ultimate positioning with respect to the male antagonists is indicated by the types of gazes they assume, or more accurately, by the ways they reciprocate the desiring gaze of the other characters.

The Division of Masculine and Feminine Space

At the start of each film the young female protagonists are both in the child-like position of being under the guardianship of a maternal authority: Tristana at her mother's home, and Viridiana in the convent. Typical of Galdós's female protagonists, they embody the model qualities of the nineteenth-century literary heroine: piety, chastity, docility and child-like innocence. Soon afterward, both Viridiana and Tristana are obliged to abandon the space of feminine protection, that is, the maternal home and the convent. They are suddenly subjected to the desiring male gaze of a surrogate parental authority, represented by the elderly "uncles."⁴ Thus, from the very beginning of the films, a dichotomy is established between

the poles of masculine and feminine social space that functions as a background for the films' action.

The strict division of masculine and feminine space in traditional Hispanic societies allows for the relative hegemony of female power in the private areas of the home and the convent. In these areas, the accepted roles a woman may assume in exchange for a measure of power are those of virgin, wife, or mother. Public space, on the other hand, is generally reserved for masculine activities: women may pass through the street or the workplace, but these are primarily considered male domains. Commenting on women in Latin American literature Jean Franco observes that

[t]he public woman is a prostitute, the public man a prominent citizen. When a woman goes public, she leaves the protected space of home and convent and exposes her body on the street or in the promiscuity of the brothel. (105)

The theme of the public woman is constant in Buñuel, and evident, for example, in the director's frequent depiction of prostitutes and sexually aggressive or promiscuous women. Neither *Viridiana* nor *Tristana* fall precisely into this category. However, they are both characters who, for differing reasons in each story, are forced out of the protected "feminine" spaces of home and convent, but do not fit easily into any of the traditional feminine domestic roles of wife, mother, or daughter. Both are ultimately marginalized by a patriarchal society that does not allow for non-traditional family relationships or modes of existence, especially among its female subjects.

Once removed from the convent or maternal home, neither *Viridiana* nor *Tristana* is permitted a traditional filial relationship with the "uncles." Instead, they are converted into unwitting erotic objects, and suffer an abrupt loss of innocence at the hands of the male protagonists. This sets in motion the process of sexual and emotional awakening that changes the course of their lives and alters their self-perception. The original sexual advances taken by the uncles are later duplicated in the actions of other male characters. The cumulative effect of the eroticisation of the female protagonists can be directly perceived in their physical and emotional

transformation, reflecting their development of strategies for survival in this highly patriarchal society.

In both films, what signals the transformations of the protagonists, aside from the physical appearance and behavior of the women, is the way they are positioned in the visual economy of looks and gazes. In *Viridiana*, the protagonist eventually assumes a specifically feminine "look." Again, this is understood as both her physical appearance and her position as both receiver and bearer of a desiring gaze, which she ultimately directs at the male protagonist. In the final scenes of *Tristana*, conversely, the protagonist appropriates what might be considered a "masculine look" by defiantly positioning herself as the active subject of an aggressive erotic gaze, and adopting strategies that are traditionally associated with the socially constructed masculine gender.

Women's Oppression and Sexual Violence in Buñuel

Virtually all of Buñuel's films treat the theme of violence in one way or another. In the early surrealist classic *L'age d'or*, violence is shown to be as inherent a part of human existence as it is in the animal world. The Mexican production *Los olvidados* demonstrates that this tendency towards violence is intensified in conditions of social injustice and deprivation. Often, violence in Buñuel takes the form of organized political violence, as in the government's brutal repression of workers in *Death in this Garden* (1956) and *That is Called the Dawn* (1955). In other instances, it is the work of anonymous terrorists, as in *The Phantom of Liberty* (1974) and *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972).

But the most common form of violence that we find depicted in Buñuel's films is violence committed by men against women. This violence, furthermore, is most often sexually motivated. To cite only a few examples, we may recall the director's depiction of the severed female eye in *Un chien andalou*, the rape and murder of young girls in *The Young One* and *Diary of a Chambermaid*, the actions of the homicidal male protagonist of *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz* and the masochistic female protagonist in *Belle de Jour*, and finally, the treatment of Conchita, who is beaten by her lover in *That Obscure Object of Desire*. In *Viridiana*, the protagonist's metamorphosis from non-sexual subject (novice) to desiring subject and desired object is initiated when she becomes a victim of sexual

violence. The experience of being victimized by male violence provokes a reaction in *Viridiana* that reinforces and affirms, rather than repudiates the system of patriarchal social relations that oppresses her. On the contrary, in *Tristana*, the protagonist's response to male oppression involves her recognition and appropriation of these same patriarchal modes of domination.

Viridiana

The complicated plot of this film, briefly summarized, is as follows: *Viridiana*, an orphaned novice about to take her vows, is obliged by the Mother Superior to pay one last visit to her widowed uncle, Don Jaime. When she arrives at his provincial estate as a cloistered nun outside of the convent walls, she violates the unspoken rules governing masculine and feminine space, and is subject for the first time to the male gaze of the outside world. The other characters, her uncle, the servant Ramona and Ramona's young daughter Rita, spy on her constantly, through doors, windows and keyholes. Both directly and through the gaze of the characters, the eye of the camera positions her as an object of enormous erotic potential, despite the fact that she is sexually taboo according to society's religious and moral laws regarding sanctity of the consecrated virgin. The many scenes of *Viridiana* in her most intimate moments—dressing, praying, sleeping—transform her into an erotic object for the public as well as the other characters, and also underlines the film's voyeuristic self-reflexivity.

The elderly uncle falls madly in love with his niece, because she bears an uncanny resemblance to her aunt, Don Jaime's wife, who died on their wedding night. The frustrated erotic desire Jaime has harbored over the years is manifested in a number of sexual "perversions." His fetishism and transvestism, for example, are depicted in a scene where he dresses up in his dead bride's wedding clothes. On the evening before his niece's anticipated departure, Don Jaime convinces *Viridiana* to put on the wedding dress, and, overcome by desire, he begs her to marry him. When she refuses, he drugs her with a powerful narcotic, takes her to a bedroom, kisses and fondles her, and contemplates raping her while she sleeps. Suddenly aware of the enormity of the transgression, he abandons the attempt. The whole scene is observed by Ramona's young daughter, and

in a complicated play of gazes, the voyeuristic pleasure of seeing without being seen is extended to the film audience as we are permitted to spy on the girl, Rita, as she spies on the uncle who contemplates the sleeping Viridiana.

The next day, the uncle confesses all to Viridiana. Horrified, she hurries to return to the convent. As she boards a bus, civil guards inform her that her uncle has hung himself. Instead of returning to the protected but hierarchical world of the convent, she defies the authority of the Church and goes to her uncle's estate to practice Christian charity independently, bringing a group of motley beggars to her newly founded shelter for the poor. She now shares the estate with her uncle's illegitimate son, Jorge, and his live-in girlfriend, Lucia. Lucia leaves, bored with the slow pace of provincial life, and jealous of Jorge's obvious attraction to his cousin. But as Viridiana pays little attention to him, Jorge settles for seducing the maid, Ramona, in a scene that ends with the rather obvious metaphor of a cat pouncing on a mouse. Meanwhile, Viridiana's unwavering piety and her devotion to the beggars become increasingly annoying to Jorge. In his modern way of thinking, her stubborn adherence to chastity and self-denial is simply incomprehensible.

But Viridiana's attempt to enjoy the relative autonomy of the cloistered nun in the world outside the convent is destined to fail. One day, she and Jorge must go into town. The beggars, not expecting their return until the next day, enter the vacant house, eat, drink, fight, and make love in a monumental orgy that ravages the place. The orgy scene presents some of the most striking and visually violent images of all of Buñuel's films. By setting the whole scene to Handel's *Messiah* and including a parodical reference to Da Vinci's painting *The Last Supper*, Buñuel returns again to the surrealist repudiation of both Christianity and the category of the aesthetic, or high art.

The orgy scene's blasphemous and festive atmosphere as well as the incongruous presence of the grotesque drunken beggars in the luxurious bourgeois dining room recall the formulations set forth by Soviet critic Mikhail Bakhtin regarding the carnivalesque theme in Rabelais. For Bakhtin, the medieval carnival represented a cathartic temporary liberation for the popular classes from the established order of authority (10). In *Viridiana*, the orgy not only depicts the temporary subversion of the

dominant social and religious order, but also prompts the suspension of prejudices among the beggars themselves: the leper, who had been ostracized earlier, is now an acceptable dance partner. Finally, the orgy serves as a catalyst for erotic transgression. After the banquet, one of the beggars attempts to rape the female companion of the blind beggar. This prompts the blind man to thrash his cane violently about the room, and signals the apocalyptic end of the party.

When Jorge and Viridiana return to the house unexpectedly, most of the beggars flee, but two of them remain. The eruption of spontaneous violence of the "low" classes contaminates the tranquility and security of the owner's "high" bourgeois household. While Ramona goes to call the police, one of the beggars assaults Jorge and ties him up, and the other rapes, or attempts to rape Viridiana. It is left ambiguous in the film and in the screenplay whether Jorge succeeds in saving her in time.

It is interesting, therefore, that most influential Buñuel critics have elected to assume that Viridiana was not raped, but rather "rescued from dishonor" by Jorge.⁵ One of the most questionable accounts of the rape scene is that of Raymond Durnat, who acknowledges the rape, but describes it as follows:

The nastiest [of the beggars], a beggar with some loathsome skin disease, if not actually syphilis or leprosy, succeeds not merely in raping Viridiana, but in forcing her *acquiescence*, until her cousin, who is tied up, bribes another beggar to stun him. (120)

Durnat's view that the beggar "forces" Viridiana's "pleasurable acquiescence" perhaps refers to the moment when she appears to faint, and loosens her hold on the phallic handles of a jumprope that the rapist wears around his waist as a belt.⁶ But in Viridiana's loss of consciousness during the rape, there is no clear indication of "pleasure," as Durnat suggests. Durnat likewise interprets an earlier scene in which Viridiana, sleepwalking, throws ashes onto her uncle's bed as a subliminal sexual invitation extended to Don Jaime, "to goad him into taking advantage of another form of sleep" (120). It is not surprising that Durnat chooses this interpretation of the sleepwalking scene, especially considering Buñuel's constant equation of erotic activity with death, most often through the juxtaposition of eroticism with images of eschatological bodily material.

Viridiana herself suggests that the ashes signify death and penitence. And although it is not unreasonable to search for unconscious erotic motives in a character's subjective dreams, it must be noted that the sleepwalking scene does not present Viridiana's subjective perspective of a dream, but rather allows Don Jaime and the cinematic spectators to observe from outside. This representation may be compared to the depiction of Pedro's dream in *Los olvidados*, where the dream is presented from the subjective perspective of the dreamer. Similarly, in both the scene where the uncle contemplates raping Viridiana and in the rape scene with the beggar, the woman is involuntarily passive; drugged or traumatized into a state of unconsciousness, and certainly not shown to be a desiring subject, as for example, is the case in the female protagonist's fantasy in *L'age d'or*.

Although during the sleepwalking scene and the two scenes of sexual assault, Viridiana is the erotic object of the character's as well as the audience's gaze, she significantly lacks even the ability to look, or to return the gaze of those around her. This recalls earlier scenes when she is positioned as the unwitting object of the other characters' voyeuristic gazes as they watch her through windows and keyholes. Another indication that the inability to see is analogous to powerlessness in this film is the prophetic portrait painted by the beggar who ultimately rapes Viridiana. This portrait ominously foreshadows her victimization, which is related to the inability to bear a gaze. In the portrait, Viridiana is represented as the Virgin Mary. Significantly, by the time the rape occurs, the beggar has completed the painting except for one detail: the Virgin's eyes are missing.

The violent rape of Viridiana by the beggar recalls the epilogue of *L'age d'or*, in which a scene from Sade's *The One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom* was evoked to suggest that sexual violence, even if only in the realm of the imagination or in literature, was the only possible answer to sexual repression in an unfree society. The beggars, who are not subject to the same religious moral precepts that determine the behavior of the bourgeois characters, freely indulge in promiscuous sexual activity among themselves. As mentioned above, there is a brief interjection of a scene during the "orgy" in which one of the men tricks a beggar woman into following him behind a sofa and rapes her. But this rape commands little attention and even provokes laughter among the group. The patriarch of the beggars joyfully pronounces: "Let them sin; that way they can better

repent afterwards." In contrast, the rape of Viridiana by the beggar is a shocking and sobering finale to the carnivalesque orgy. It demonstrates, in one sense, that sexual violence ignores class divisions. Most importantly, the rape scene approximates the category of blasphemy in that it depicts the profanation of the sacred since, although she never professed officially, Viridiana has already assumed the status of a consecrated religious object.

Her rape by the beggar is thus comparable to Sadian descriptions of what Angela Carter terms "the desecration of the temple": the profanation of Sade's most virtuous female characters who suffer physical and sexual abuse in proportion to the degree of their own piety and virtue (Ballesteros 71-75). Indeed, a clear parallel can be drawn between Viridiana and the original victim of *The Misfortunes of Virtue*, the Marquis de Sade's hapless protagonist, Justine. Like Viridiana, the innocent Justine is orphaned as a young woman. She is raped, beaten and ultimately destroyed because she stubbornly remains virtuous rather than accepting the life of libertinism, vice, and crime that has allowed her cruel sister Juliette to become wealthy and powerful. One conclusion many critics have drawn from Viridiana's rape is that Buñuel, like Sade, is thus suggesting that Christian charity, chastity, and virtue are useless and obsolete; they are relics of an irrational and obsolete moral system that has no place in the modern world. This is similarly the clear message of Buñuel's 1958 Mexican film *Nazarín*, another adaptation of a Galdós novel.

The male protagonist of *Nazarín*, a priest and contemporary ascetic, learns, like Viridiana, that his Christian charity is ill-fitted to the material and emotional needs of the poor and dispossessed people to whom he ministers. Throughout the film, Nazarín attempts to embody the Christian virtues of poverty, charity, and chastity, even when he is stripped of his pulpit and marginalized from the official Church. He wanders about the countryside preaching and living on alms. Eventually, Nazarín is joined by two women: Andara, a reformed prostitute, and Beatriz, who has been abandoned by her stereotypically *machista* boyfriend, El Pinto. Nazarín's screen transformation comes at the end of the film, after he is unjustly imprisoned, and a female by-stander innocently offers him a pineapple. Overwhelmed by emotion, he accepts the gift, and as the film closes, he walks off, evidently transformed from saint into man.

The parallels between Viridiana and Nazarín are evident. We may even distinguish a dialogic relationship between the two film protagonists, which does in fact exist between the literary Nazarín and his female counterpart in Galdós's novel *Halma*. In the novel, once released from prison, Nazarín assists The Countess of Halma to found and run her shelter for the poor. But the differences between the cinematic Nazarín and Buñuel's character Viridiana are significant. Although Nazarín is beaten, insulted and deceived throughout the film, his transformation, for all the psychological trauma it unleashes, is provoked by an appeal to his human emotions; it is neither violent nor sexual. Viridiana, on the other hand, must undergo a violent sexual assault; her body as well as her psyche must be violated in order for her to symbolically "become a woman." Unlike *Nazarín*, where there is no suggestion of an erotic awakening in the priest, nor a significant change in his appearance by the time the film ends, Viridiana's interior transformation is accompanied by a sudden and unmistakable change, both in her physical appearance and in her newly assumed position as bearer of an erotic gaze.

The scene that follows her rape shows an encounter between Viridiana and her cousin Jorge. The beggars have departed, and Jorge, intent on modernizing the antiquated estate, instructs some workmen on the installation of a new electric system. The traditional provincial mansion's transformation from old to new is paralleled by Viridiana's "new look" in the scene. In the screenplay, Buñuel describes her as now possessing "a look we have not seen in her before—full of gratitude, excuses, tenderness [...] the look of a woman" (134). She immediately takes a small mirror out of a drawer, gazes at herself, and arranges her hair and face. This scene concisely illustrates that she has not only become aware that she is the object of the other character's gaze, but that she has become the object of her own vision as well. As John Berger points out in *Ways of Seeing*, a woman is always surveying herself at the same time that she is performing (46-47). Viridiana is now subject to her own scrutinizing gaze as well as to the external male gaze, which in this case, is concentrated in Jorge's look.

In the last scene of the film, we see the final results of Viridiana's transformation. Instead of her usual prudish mode of attire and behavior, she has suddenly become "feminine": her hair is let down, her face made up, she wears stylish clothes, and as Buñuel describes her in the

screenplay, “nunca ha tenido tanta feminidad... parece haberse convertido al fin en una muchacha parecida a las otras” (134). The fact that carnal passion has replaced religious passion in her life is exemplified by interspersed shots of her crown of thorns burning in a bonfire outside. For the first time, she goes to Jorge’s room. In contrast to the sleep walking episode or the attempted rape scenes with both Don Jaime and the beggar, this time her eyes are wide open.

When Jorge opens the door to let her in, a series of shot-reverse-shots show an exchange of looks between Viridiana and Jorge in which it becomes clear that she has come to visit him with the idea of reciprocating his desire. At first her eyes are lowered, as is her usual attitude with Jorge. Then, she raises her eyes, and stares at him intently. Jorge is confused at first by this unexpected visit, but upon perceiving her gaze he immediately comprehends the motive for her visit. Delighted, he invites her in. Once inside, Viridiana sees Ramona, with whom Jorge has obviously been intimate. Jorge invites the two women to play cards, and as Viridiana takes her place in the insinuated *ménage à trois*, she stares listlessly in front of her. During this last scene, in which rock and roll music is playing on the record player, Jorge chats incessantly. Significantly, both women, who are now rivals for the attention of Jorge, have been silent during the entire scene. Viridiana’s silence here indicates that Jorge has become the new authority in her life and she now communicates through her looks alone, that is, both her physical appearance and the gaze she directs at Jorge.

I have referred to *Viridiana* as a very free adaptation of the Galdós’s novel *Halma*. Although Galdós’s novel differs in many ways from the film *Viridiana*, the most important difference rests in the manner in which each narrative ends. At the end of *Halma*, the protagonist marries her cousin. In *Viridiana*, no such resolution is possible. Destined to remain in an ambiguous position between the reified figure of the virgin and that of the wife and mother, the protagonist utilizes the strategies at hand to survive in the provincial patriarchal society in which she is destined to remain. Indeed, she submits herself to Jorge’s gaze, and by reciprocating it, assumes what Mulvey terms the “correct” feminine position in classic cinema, the passive receptor of a male gaze (70). When she is permitted a gaze of her own, it is a seductive “come hither” look, which marks the end

of her autonomy with respect to Jorge and the abandonment of her religiously-motivated sexual abstinence.

In a 1962 interview about this film, Buñuel observed that his heroine "va del amor a Dios al amor al hombre" (Vidal 256). Obviously, the term "man" here is meant to be understood in the general sense of "humanity." This same commentary could apply to the transformation of Nazarín. But in fact, by the end of *Viridiana*, it is clear that neither the love of God nor the love of man (humanity) concerns her, as is evident in the discarded crown of thorns and the failed experiment with the beggars. The myth of the virgin is deconstructed through sexual violence, and the "love" in the last scenes is no more than the expression of individual erotic desire represented in the cinematic exchange of looks among the three characters.

As in earlier Buñuel films, the love object in *Viridiana* is not unique but is interchangeable and negotiable. This is evident in the uncle's mad love for his niece who replaced his dead wife, and Jorge's unproblematic substitution of Ramona for Lucia, and later of Viridiana for Ramona. In fact, because of the Spanish film censors' objections, this final card-playing scene replaced another more explicit one of Viridiana actually taking the place of Ramona in Jorge's bed.

Viridiana was prohibited in Spain by the National Commission on Censorship until 1977, which cited the following objections to the film: "blasfema; antireligiosa; grosera; ataque a la caridad; crueldad y menosprecio de la posición de la clase pobre" (Ballesteros 71-75). Some censors agreed to approve the film provided that the scenes which were considered blasphemous be cut. Curiously, not one of the censors makes mention of the rape scenes. Violence against women, even against a religious woman, is accepted as a natural and necessary element in film narrative. But violence and offensive references made against the Church, as in the film's parody of Da Vinci's painting *The Last Supper* or the use of Handel's *Messiah* as background music to the beggars' orgy, represent a much greater threat to the established order and cannot be tolerated.

What furthermore cannot be tolerated in the film is a woman who challenges the dominant and exclusive authority of both the Catholic Church and the patriarchy in general. Viridiana represents a woman who sought a measure of autonomy from the oppression of patriarchal society, first inside and later outside of the convent walls. In the end, however, it is

clear that she is unable to significantly alter her environment to create a non-traditional role for herself inside of the very rigid social order in which she lives. Realizing that society is unchangeable, she resorts to transforming herself instead, by strategically adapting her own desire, her appearance and her ways of looking.

Tristana

Tristana is another example of the transformation of an orphaned girl into erotic object. The setting for the film is Toledo, in the years just before the Spanish Civil War. After the death of her mother, the beautiful young Tristana arrives at the house of a family friend, Don Lope. It had been agreed that this aging, vain, bourgeois gentleman was to be her guardian. Lope, a modern version of a traditional Spanish *hidalgo*, does not work, and thus struggles financially but insists on keeping up the appearance of an aristocratic lifestyle. He sets about imbuing his charge with his liberal ideology: he teaches her she must be a free and independent woman, to despise vulgar materialism and to mistrust Church and government. He is also a womanizer and recognizes only two categories of women who are off limits to his advances: the wife of a friend and a perfectly innocent girl. Evidently, he makes an exception for Tristana, for he seduces her only days after she arrives. They live with the maid Saturna and her deaf-mute son Saturno, in a relationship where, as Lope states, he is "her husband and her father."

In spite of his professed liberal views on women, Tristana becomes a prisoner in Lope's house. She is rarely allowed to go out and never unaccompanied by Saturna. On one outing, she meets Horacio, a painter, and visits his studio. She returns many times, and they fall in love. Eventually, Tristana escapes with Horacio, who takes her to live abroad. Two years later, they return to Toledo. Tristana is suffering from leg cancer. She decides to leave Horacio and return to Lope's house. The leg must be amputated. Tristana becomes increasingly hostile to Lope and begins to spend more time in Church. At the advice of her confessor she decides to marry Lope, thus assuring her future economic security, although it is evident that she despises him. Her sexual activity has been reduced to exposing her body to, and probably seducing, the adolescent Saturno. She is embittered, and no longer concerns herself with her

appearance. One night, during an apparent heart attack, Lope pleads with Tristana to call the doctor. Instead, she opens the window to let in the winter air and then watches as he lies dying.

Tristana, like Viridiana, is initially removed from the protected feminine space of her mother's home and exposed to the sexual excesses of her guardian, whom she calls "uncle." Unlike Viridiana, who was devoutly religious, she is at the start not only the picture of chastity, but ideologically neutral. Tristana is therefore a *tabula rasa* for Lope's liberal teachings: his rejection of Christian morality, and in particular, the institution of marriage. But Lope turns out to be a hypocrite. He tells her that women must be free and independent, but later declares: "Mujer honrada, pierna quebrada y en casa,"⁷ ominously foreshadowing the mutilation of her own leg later in the film.

As in *Viridiana*, the bourgeois home, which is usually marked as a "protected" feminine space, and whose masculine counterpart is the street and the cafe where Lope goes to converse and drink with his male friends, becomes the setting for the heroine's sexual exploitation. Like Viridiana, Tristana finds herself defenseless against the desiring gaze of her "uncle." She is never the object of violent sexual attacks by the male characters. Rather, her transformation is set in motion by the much subtler process of seduction. The actual scene of Tristana's seduction by Lope has an element of the absurd. In it, a comic effect is created by the contrast between Lope's paternal and gentlemanly demeanor, and his *donjuanesque* behavior with Tristana. During the seduction scene, whether from nervousness, embarrassment, or the complete surprise she experiences at Lope's actions, Tristana herself cannot refrain from laughing.

The scene following the seduction quickly dispels any notion of a romantic and reciprocal relationship between the two. It depicts Tristana two years later, nursing the sick Lope. On the surface, it seems they have settled into an ordinary relationship of man and wife, with Tristana now assuming a maternal role with respect to her elderly tutor as well. But she already shows signs of the discontent that will lead her to the ultimate act of subversion: Lope's murder. She insults him, destroys his belongings, and dreams of the day she can leave. When she falls in love with Horacio and admits to the painter that she is not a virgin, her apprenticeship with Lope, ironically, that prompts her to warn him: "Sé que estoy deshonorada,

pero libre para quererte. ¿Cómo me prefieres? ¿Cómo una casada infiel... o libre?"

With Horacio, she appears finally free and happy. Deeply influenced by Lope's views, though, Tristana will not marry Horacio. Like Viridiana, she fits into none of the accepted roles for women in patriarchal society. Also like Viridiana, her real transformation comes as a result of a corporal attack, a violent assault on her body. Tristana, however, is not the victim of external violence. This time, it is her own body that betrays her. Her illness and the subsequent amputation of her leg is not simply an injection of *pathos* into the narrative. We have already mentioned that in Buñuel, the mutilation of the human body, and the fetishistic representation of the severed parts, is always imbued with erotic significance, as was the eye and hands in *Un chien andalou*. Now, Tristana's prosthetic leg becomes almost a character in its own right, and a new focus of visual interest in the film. The leg, in fact, becomes a symbol of castration representing Tristana's mutilated sexual and emotional integrity while it metonymically conveys the erotic potential of her beautiful but imperfect body. Earlier in the narrative, a recurring daydream or hallucination of Tristana's provides another example of anatomical mutilation that betrays the erotic force of the unconscious: in a Church bell tower, as she reaches out to touch the phallic clapper of a large bell, it is suddenly transformed into the severed head of Don Lope. This occurs, significantly, before her seduction, and anticipates the sexual power that Lope eventually exercises over her. Important as well, is the juxtaposition of the patriarchal authority of the Catholic Church as represented in the monotonous ritual of the bells, and the equally pervasive authority of Lope.

I observed that in *Viridiana*, the protagonist undergoes a rapid transformation after the violent rape by the beggar: she suddenly assumes a "feminine look," and suffers a relative loss of autonomy, reflected in her receiving and reciprocating Jorge's desirous gaze. In *Tristana*, a similar process occurs in reverse: whereas before her operation, she was young, pretty, and coyly submissive to Lope's authority, after it, Tristana becomes bitter and disobedient, no longer careful to maintain a "feminine" appearance. She ages rapidly, dresses in drab clothing, and never smiles. Nevertheless, the maid's son Saturno is fascinated by her and seizes every opportunity to spy on her, often gazing voyeuristically through her

bedroom window. Like Viridiana, Tristana is positioned in these scenes as the object of the male character's gaze, as well as that of the spectator.⁸

At first, Tristana is enraged by Saturno's insistent stare. In a crucial scene on the day of her wedding to Lope, however, there is a sudden change in her attitude. The scene begins as she is looking at herself in a mirror in her bedroom. When she notices Saturno spying, she leaves the wooden leg on the bed, walks to the balcony, and opens her dressing-gown, exposing her naked body to the mute adolescent. Saturno retreats, and then runs away, awe-stricken. For the first time since the operation, we see Tristana smile. The exchange of looks between her and Saturno clearly indicates that rather than being the passive feminine object of the male gaze, this time Tristana has appropriated the gaze, and thus the power of the look, for herself. This is underscored by her unmistakably seductive look, the filmmaker's framing of her whole body, and his positioning of her above Saturno on the balcony. Also, in a reversal of the original seduction scene with Lope, it is the woman who bears the active gaze, and the male who is passive: both because he is sexually ingenuous, and because he is unable to speak.

Just as Lope exerted his authority over her, Tristana now assumes a position of relative sexual power. Like Lope, her object is the weak and silent adolescent. Moreover, she is now in a powerful position in relation to the elderly and ailing Lope. Her decision to let him die toward the end of the film reaffirms this power, related, as in the earlier scene with Saturno, to the act of looking; she watches as Lope agonizes, but does not help him. This offers an alternative explanation for her action, which critics have, for the most part, perceived as a simple act of revenge. The film ends with a series of flashbacks of Tristana's life, from her most recent stay with Lope to her relationship with Horacio, to scenes of her seduction as a young woman by Lope. The cycle is complete: Tristana, having appropriated the masculine gaze and the very tactics used by Lope to assure her submissiveness, will lead her future life following his example with Saturno, reversing, if only temporarily, the balance of sexual power in gender relationships to her own ends.

The change in attitude between the character of Viridiana and that of Tristana marks a turning point in Buñuel's representations of women overall. In earlier films the female characters tend to be represented as

both the traditional lovely objects of male desire and the mutilated objects of male violence. *Viridiana* and *Tristana*, however, mark the beginning of a change that will be consistent throughout the rest of Buñuel's filmmaking career. After these two films, Buñuel made a series of adaptations of novels that depict strong, rebellious, and often independent women. Examples of such characters are found among the protagonists of *The Diary of a Chambermaid*, *Belle de Jour* and *That Obscure Object of Desire*. As the title of the latter, Buñuel's final film indicates, the woman is always untenable and incomprehensible for the male protagonist. But following the making of *Viridiana* and *Tristana*, she is just as likely to be emboldened, uncompromising, and even lethal.

Notes

1. See, for example, Lisa Conde: "The Buñuel Alternative to Galdós's *Tristana*," *Romance Studies* 18.2 (2000): 135-44; Andrés Amorós: "*Tristana*: de Galdós a Buñuel," *Actas del Primer Congreso Internacional Galdosiano* (Las Palmas: Excelentísimo Cabildo Insular de Gran Canaria, 1977), 319-29; and Antonio Lara: "Lectura de *Tristana*, según la novela de Galdós," *La imaginación en libertad*. Ed. Antonio Lara (Madrid: Universidad Complutense, 1981), 99-247.
2. See Laura Mulvey: "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by *Duel in the Sun*." *Feminism and Film Theory*. Ed. Constance Penley (New York: Routledge, 1988); David Rodowick: "The Difficulty of Difference." *Wide Angle* 5.1 (1982): 4-15; and Tania Modleski: "Never to be Thirty-Six Years Old. *Rebecca* as Female Oedipal Drama." *Wide Angle* 5.1 (1982): 34-41.
3. See E. Ann Kaplan: "Is the Gaze Male?" *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York: Methuen, 1983), and Mary Ann Doane: "Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body." *Feminism and Film Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988).
4. Both "uncles" are, significantly, played by the same actor, Fernando Rey. Not surprisingly, Rey, who has come to be regarded as the director's