Viridiana

Director: **Luis Buñuel**
Country: **Spain**
Date: **1962**

A review from *dvdtalk.com*:

Viridiana is widely acknowledged as the key surrealist film of the modern era and the movie that re-energized the career of its director Luis Buñuel, paving the way for two decades more of provocative masterpieces: The Exterminating Angel, Simon of the Desert, Belle du Jour, Tristana, The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie, That Obscure Object of Desire. Like his original Avant-garde works Un chien andalou and L'Âge d'or from 30 years before, Viridiana achieved notoriety by being banned as blasphemous, in this case by Fascist Generalissimo Francisco Franco. That's perfect weather for Buñuel's brand of cinematic scandal!

Viridiana is often described as Luis Buñuel's best picture, and it's certainly a clear and pure statement of his peculiar philosophy of life. It is indeed mildly blasphemous but its anti-clericalism is highly refined. Buñuel defines himself (when he can be pinned down) as an atheist, but anybody watching his pictures can see that they're the work of a man with Catholic thoughts etched deeply into his psyche.

Back in 1930, L'Âge d'or was so premeditatedly calculated to scandalize that it can be at least partially categorized as a cultural stunt, a film designed to be banned and thus win a reputation for its makers. Salvador Dalí certainly adhered to this publicity-seeking mindset but time and investigation prove that Buñuel's twisted themes have followed him all of his life. His fixations on perversion and cruelty aren't gratuitous. If he seems heartless it is because he's searching for the truth, no matter how cruel it may be. His movies are brilliant, simple constructions that illuminate the world as it is without resort to fantasy or political posturing. His themes are universal.

Viridiana's subject, like Nazarín before it, is about the relationship between Christian ideals and the real world. Idealistic priest Nazarín rejects the structure of the church and attempts to put Christian values into use, an effort that leads quickly to a demoralizing defeat. Viridiana decides against becoming a nun, and instead attempts to practice Christian ideals in a practical setting. Her efforts go disastrously wrong. The movie has no overt humor but carries a wickedly ironic charge; as usual, Buñuel has little difficulty making reality and human nature seem totally absurd.

The film is broken into two halves. The first part follows a traditional pattern of Gothic horror. Viridiana's disturbed uncle Don Jaime ruins her self-image, preventing her from rejoining her convent. She foolishly underestimates him and plays along with his obviously necrophiliac attempt to recreate his tragic wedding night; her cooperation is perhaps the film's only really far-fetched contrivance. Viridiana veers into horror territory when Don Jaime carries her drugged to his bedroom and begins to "play," a sequence that may have been the direct inspiration for Riccardo Freda's The Horrible Dr. Hichcock.

Buñuel's images abound with objects that are given a different significance than in Hitchcock films. The Master of Suspense uses them as shorthand to heighten suspense and avoid complicated exposition, and Buñuel uses them for their magical, surreal qualities. We know that Viridiana practices humility by sleeping on a hard surface but her prayers to a collection of objects representing the crucifixion (hammer, nails, a crown of thorns) seems as obsessive as her uncle's fetish relationship with his wife's wedding clothes.

Later, we see a small crucifix that doubles as a hidden flick-knife, an unpleasant item reportedly common in Spain.

Buñuel makes another even more perverse association through a child's jump-rope. Don Jaime gives it to the maid's daughter, perhaps to watch her legs while she jumps. When he uses the rope to hang himself it takes on more unwholesome associations, linking perverse sexuality with the mortal sin of suicide. The little girl is reprimanded for using it to jump rope again, right where Don Jaime died. Much later, one of the filthy beggars finds the rope and offhandedly steals it to hold his pants up ... an object "full" of significance is re-transformed back into a hank of meaningless rope.

After Don Jaime's suicide Viridiana regroups and energetically reaches out to a number of local beggars. She houses and feeds them at the villa, and asks only that they help her to form a little community of peace and good will. What happens is like Nazarín in reverse. Viridiana's sincere Christian charity is abused from the start. Initially grateful, the rag-tag group soon demonstrates that poverty and misery have no connection to higher virtues. Her beggars are two-faced, suspicious thieves who treat each other cruelly, have just as many prejudices as middle-class people and are spiteful and dangerous to boot. Viridiana cares for them and encourages them to better themselves, but all they do is patronize her and take advantage of her charity.

Don Jaime's illegitimate son Jorge (Francisco Rabal) shares the house with Viridiana. He's a practical materialist interested in improving the property, which hasn't been touched in twenty years. He's brought a mistress in tow, but she senses that he's really interested in his ex-novitiate relative and soon leaves. Jorge takes advantage of the maid Ramona as casually as he accepts the exit of his mistress. Jorge's seduction of Ramona in the attic is represented by a cat pouncing on a rat.

Jorge may be a chauvinist, but he's no less motivated to "improve things" than is Viridiana. They're compared in one of Buñuel's most impressive montages, a fast juxtaposition of the beggars led in prayer, static and pious, inter-cut with quick cuts of Jorge's men mixing concrete, breaking down old walls and building new ones. On one side is the spiritual and on the other is the materialistic.

The best scene in the film is a wickedly keen parable that puts Orson Welles' scorpion and cuckoo clock digressions to shame. Jorge pities a ragged dog that is tied under a donkey cart and forced to run or be dragged to death. Perhaps inspired by Viridiana's ideas of charity, Jorge buys it and feels very good about himself. Behind him, another even more pitiful dog passes in the other direction, unseen. Jorge had not much earlier chided Viridiana for thinking that caring for eight beggars would make a dent in the beggar problem, and here he shows himself the victim of his own folly. To add irony to irony, after he's freed his new little dog, it still wants to go back to its previous abusive owner!

Left on their own, Viridiana's beggars waste no time in invading the house and staging a feast that becomes a drunken orgy. Buñuel purposely recreates the famous painting of The Last Supper, for no other reason than to be impishly provocative; one of the beggar women lifts her skirts to "take a picture," with the camera "her parents gave her." Earlier on Don Jaime told Viridiana that he had raped her, but then he recanted, upsetting her so much that she felt she was no longer fit to return to the convent. Now she's attacked for real by two of her own beggars. When she comes out of the shock, Viridiana no longer has any thoughts of a holy mission. She goes to Jorge's room. He invites her to play cards, making a joke of the fact that she's finally come across to his way of thinking. The atmosphere is cheapened by an American Rock 'n Roll song playing on a phonograph ... a device that Buñuel would use in his later Simon of the Desert to represent Hell.

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