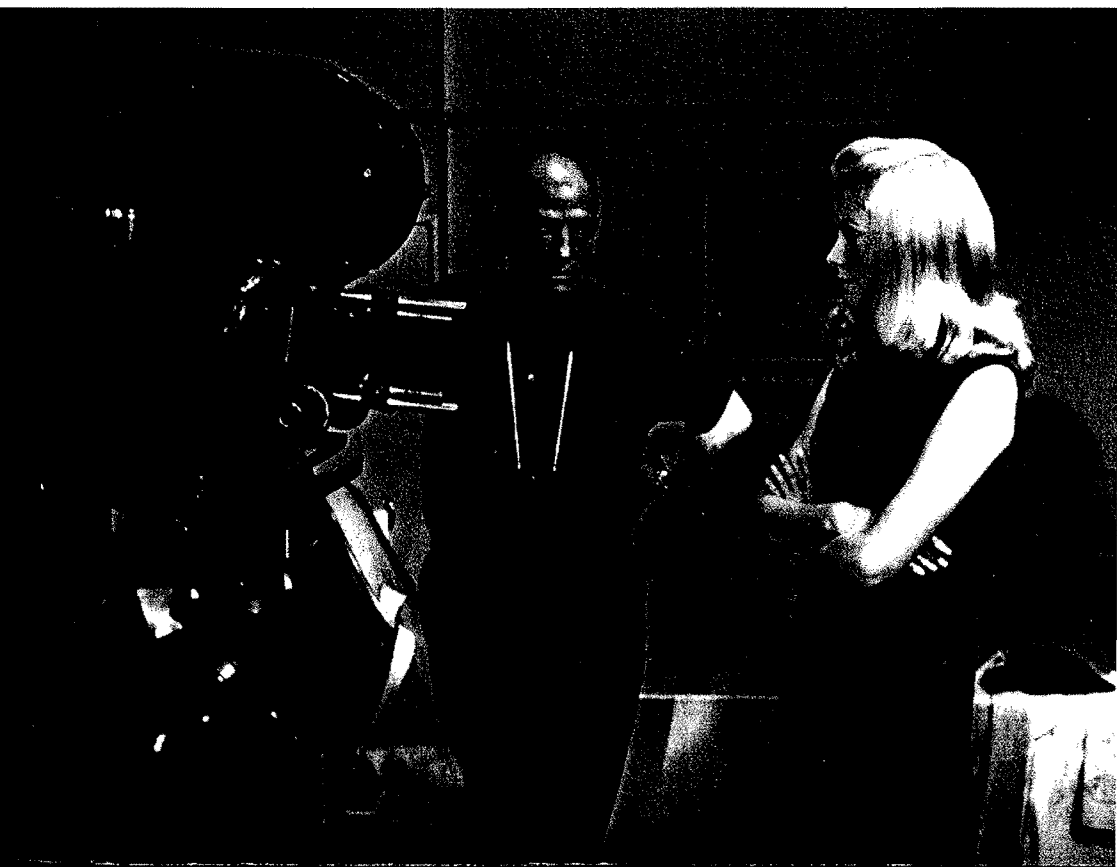


Luis Buñuel

Edited by Peter William Evans and Isabel Santaolalla



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Scenes of Liturgy and Perversion in Buñuel

Vicente Sánchez Biosca

There is nothing new in saying that *L'Âge d'or* (1930) launches from the very heart of Christianity, namely, of Christ himself, a sacrilegious denunciation of Catholicism. The last section of the film projects Christian iconography upon the Sadean universe of *The 120 Days of Sodom*; the result is a devastating attack, ridiculing the fundamental principles of Christianity. However, any half-attentive viewer will notice two additional elements: first, that the religious emphasis at the centre of a surrealist attitude is characteristically Spanish, something familiar to those with Buñuel's background and education, but somewhat alien to those from other European countries less burdened with Catholicism (France, in particular); second, that the joke produces a comic effect in place of the intolerant seriousness of a frontal ideological attack without, of course, dispensing with it altogether. It is very likely that both elements are more interrelated than appears to be the case at first sight. I would like to concentrate on the comic implications.

Thirty years later, Buñuel made *Viridiana* (1961) as a Mexican-Spanish venture. This film established him as a director (his triumph at Cannes was much talked about, above all for the scandal it provoked).¹ Religious issues (chastity, charity, devotion) are also at the heart of this film, replete with the most varied perversions (fetishism, necrophilia, transvestism). The effect produced is also, at least in part, humorous.

There is one enormous difference, though, between these two examples: if Buñuel's position can be qualified as external to religion in *L'Âge d'or*, it is interior to it in *Viridiana*; that is, in order to develop the script and to create with a level of technical mastery seldom found in Buñuel, the world of objects – fetishes – the links of the religious world with that of the flesh, of the sacrificial with the nuptial bed and from here to the mortuary, of the sublime with the obscene, it was essential to live very close to the subject, to feel and enjoy its overlaps. This is only possible when one surrenders to evocations, to metaphors,

to the rhythms of those worlds that no longer shock as logically they should, but instead intertwine, in the process clearly provoking short-circuits, but also pleasant slippages.

Religion in *Viridiana* is a condition of pleasure and for that reason it is a *conditio sine qua non* to live it from within, displaying it, but also, like the fetishist, detaining it in each of these displays, delaying the climax, noticing unexpected connections and exploring them with delight.

II

The Christian religion is far from being an accidental component in Buñuel's work. All his films show complex transactions with its referents, oscillating between the popular ingenuity with which the farce of original sin is staged in the pastoral *La ilusión viaja en tranvía* (1953),² the boundless and hyperbolic temptations and miracles of *Simón del desierto* (1965), and the systematic recreation of hierarchies of *La Voie lactée* (1969).

I shall concentrate on a specific area of religion: liturgy. This choice is neither accidental nor capricious, as liturgy is nothing other than 'the Church in prayer', that is to say, the Christian assembly performing ritual acts that strengthen the bonds between its faithful, linking them to their God. The precise distinctiveness of liturgy lies in the fact that manifested within it is the Christian imagination and its capacity for the codification of evocative scenes. According to a reputable essay:

the majority of liturgical symbols are biblical symbols, the understanding of which is given by the Sacred Scripture that has formed and nourished the Christian imagination ... Through liturgical actions, when we make the gestures of prayer, when we act, we reproduce the gestures and actions of those who have preceded us in the faith since Abraham. Liturgy reproduces the images of the history of salvation that the Bible makes significant for us.

Martimort, 1992, p. 199

A stronger reason recommends this choice: its high ritual value makes liturgy, with its repetition of participatory scenes, monotonous for the outside observer, but laden with performative power in the participants' eyes, the celebrant included, as demonstrated by the sacraments. So cinema would appear a suitable medium for turning these ritual scenes into representations of another sign (the perverse phantom, also repeated to the point of satiety, would be a good example to illustrate the Sadean source of Buñuel's work).

For several reasons the Mexican films are a particularly rich area for the study of liturgical representation, distortion and perversion: first, because of their

strict generic codification that fixes stereotypes and follows them faithfully; second, because of their subjection to narrative criteria that forces the use of liturgical ritual in the story, in contrast to what happens in Buñuel's French films, which are freer and more given to the collage style; and third, as a result of the weight of Christian iconography in the Mexico of the 1940s and 50s.

I will look at three examples from Buñuel films. In the first of these, *Ensayo de un crimen* (1955), the liturgical reference is apparently a mere anecdote of no importance. However, close analysis reveals a strong link with the narrative and imagery of the film. In the second, *Él* (1952), a liturgical motif, the Maundy Thursday washing ceremony, initiates the narrative and remains crucially linked to it. The third, *Viridiana* (1961) – a real liturgical arsenal – presents the core of Marian devotion in a boldly sexual manner. In all three cases, woman – her virginity, innocence and purity – is represented erotically. Rather than a transgression of Marian chastity, an eroticisation of woman, through her coupling with liturgical codes that refer to the Virgin, is at play.

III

Ensayo de un crimen, a film inspired by fantastic more than by religious tales,³ contains nevertheless two scenes that, between them, condense the liturgical contribution to the imagery of this fiction. Archibaldo (Ernesto Alonso) arrives at the house of Carlota Cervantes (Ariadna Welter) for the first time, and her mother asks Alejandro (Rodolfo Landa), Carlota's lover, to leave the mansion. At this stage, the plot is not yet clear, but the link between Carlota and Alejandro is easily deduced, as is the pretence that the Cervantes family makes of Carlota's purity and innocence in front of Archibaldo who is, after all, a good catch as a husband. Archibaldo is urged to enter a private chapel where he discovers Carlota in an attitude of prayer. The camera makes a highly complex gyrotory movement while focusing on the mother who, dressed in black, *blocks* the vision of Alejandro, with whom she shares the secret of her daughter's pretence. This is one of those almost Hitchcockian subtle camera movements that are rarely found in the work of Buñuel, who never denied that his technique was limited, achieving in the best of cases an effective discretion. Meanwhile, Carlota's voice is heard off-screen reciting a Hail Mary. The scene concludes with a medium shot of Alejandro, once the mother has left the scene. It is at this point that we enter the chapel.

In close-up, we have Archibaldo; in the background, on her knees before an altar to the Virgin, Carlota concluding her prayers. The half-light lends serenity to this *sancta sanctorum* of the bourgeois home. Archibaldo brings Carlota a clay glass that he has made, and she places this as an offering to the Virgin. The protagonist, who a moment earlier had been troubled by terrible memories that

brought to the fore his criminal instincts, is moved by the sacred atmosphere of the place. 'I am moved', he says, 'by this peaceful atmosphere you all live in' (*Me conmueve este ambiente de paz en que viven ustedes*). Tormented by his future, he opens up before Carlota:

Usted es para mí un ideal. Sé que su pureza y su ingenuidad podrían salvarme. Pero no me atrevo a pedirle que se ligue demasiado a un destino que puede ser trágico. Estoy convencido de que no soy un hombre como otro cualquiera. Conozco mis aspiraciones y me dan miedo. ¿Me creería usted? A veces quisiera ser un gran santo; otras veces veo con gran certeza que puedo ser un gran criminal.

[For me you are an ideal. I know that your purity and innocence could save me. But I do not dare to ask you to attach yourself too closely to a destiny that could be tragic ... I am convinced that I am not a man like others. I know my aspirations and they frighten me. Would you believe me? Sometimes, I would like to be a great saint; at other times I know with certainty that I could be a great criminal.]

They are filmed now in medium shot, without the altar being visible, but the confession is interrupted by the mother. When this happens, the couple hide on either side of the statue of the Virgin. The altar again becomes visible.

The scene condenses the relationship between Carlota and Archibaldo. The incarnation of the pure and innocent woman in the eyes of her suitor, Carlota also represents the possibility of salvation, that is to say, of redemption from his terrible desires. However, Carlota presents herself before our eyes and ears in a state of purity thanks to the religious setting and the prayer she so devoutly recites directed, not coincidentally, to the Virgin. Despite everything, the girl's purity will soon be contradicted, and her falseness has, in reality, already been suggested. So, behind the apparent chastity of the redeeming woman hides a sinner. A fuller understanding of the meaning of this sequence requires analysis of the second scene in which the Hail Mary is recited by the same lips, as this contains another turn of the screw.

On the eve of the wedding that will, or so Archibaldo hopes, banish forever the spell of the musical box that unleashes the fulfilment of his destructive desires, a letter from Alejandro reveals the stark reality that Archibaldo has to contemplate while crouching outside a building: Carlota is not the pure and saintly woman that he had imagined. She is going to meet her former lover under cover of night. Destroyed by the revelation, and with all hope of salvation ruined, the box's music, distorted as it always is when his criminal impulses resurface, sounds in his ears, and Archibaldo fantasises about a murder plan for the wedding night. In the matrimonial chamber, Carlota, about to remove the crown and the veil of her white wedding gown before the mirror, is detained by

Archibaldo and subjected to a ceremony that must end in the crime. It is a perverse ritual that threatens the non-existent purity, and dramatises it through a religious code as if death had to be prefaced by the representation of such purity.

Quiero mirarte así, cubierta con esta corona y ese velo que simbolizan pureza. Tu cándida pureza, tan blanca y transparente, que permite contemplar, sin velos, tu alma de niña. Quisiera verte arrodillada, rezando, como te presentaste ante mí aquella mañana – ¿Te acuerdas? – en que te dije que quisiera ser un gran criminal o un gran santo ... Te he visto tantas veces rezando en mi imaginación. Quisiera volverte a ver como aquel día.

[I want to see you like this, covered with this crown and veil that symbolise purity. Your innocent purity, so white and transparent that it allows one to see your child-like soul unveiled. I would like to see you kneeling, praying, as you presented yourself to me that morning – remember? – when I told you I wanted to be a great criminal or a great saint ... I have seen you praying so many times in my mind! I wanted to see you again as you were that day.]

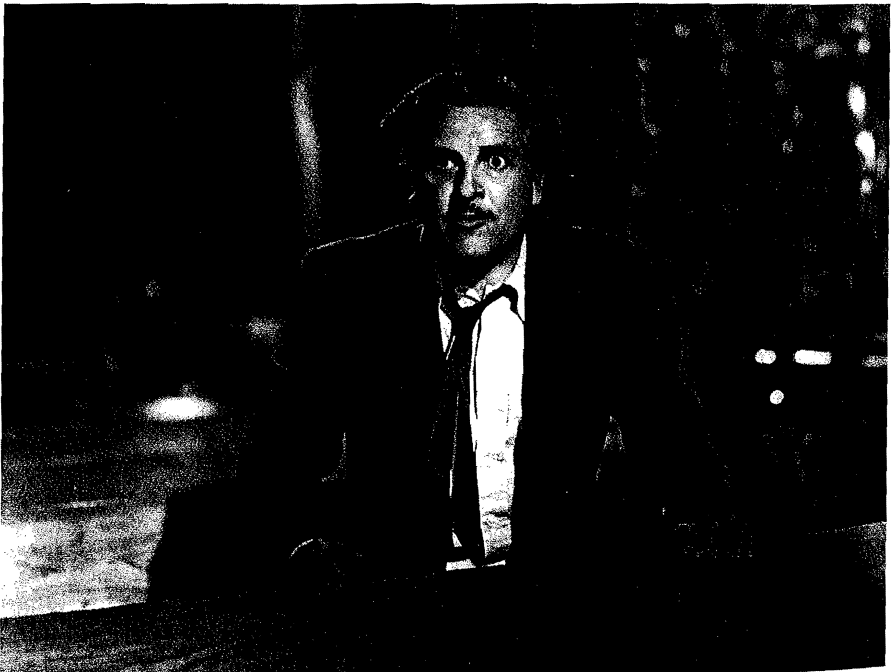
This is strange conduct. After all, the moment to which Archibaldo refers here was not their first meeting (although it is indeed the first time the spectator sees them together). It is therefore surprising that it is precisely this moment that has etched itself so deeply in his mind. It is essential to recapture the impact of this moment of pretence (the impure woman feigning purity and praying to the Virgin, the incarnation, after all, of supreme purity) as a scene prior to the murder. Forced to do so, Carlota kneels, crosses her hands in a pious attitude and begins to recite the Hail Mary aloud and deliberately. Of course, the choice of prayer is spontaneous and nobody, neither the viewer nor the characters, asks why this particular prayer, but it seems clear that the staging of sin and purity require a prayer to the Virgin.

A new, surprisingly subtle camera movement accompanies the unchanging soundtrack. Carlota progressively penetrates the imaginary, expiatory world of the prayer she has been immersed in, emphasising her prayer with a heartfelt supplication, or rather her convincingly feigned repentance, to the crowned Virgin (this is the meaning of the Hail Mary). A low-angle shot emphasises the penitential attitude of the prayer further still. The scene is extremely complex within its simplicity: a woman dressed in her wedding gown in the intimacy of her matrimonial chamber, about to give herself to her husband, recites a prayer of penitence to the Virgin in the presence of someone who (although cheated and now the author of this staged betrayal) enjoys – and, of course, also suffers – the image of purity he knows to be feigned and fraudulent. An imaginary scene, that is to say, a phantasm, of blemished purity and sexual potential,

unfolds by invoking the Virgin Mary herself: this is the ideal moment to perpetrate the crime on the body of the sinner, which, furthermore will be carried out on the bed, prepared for an act of sex that will not take place. The scene is, then, the premise for the execution of the crime, but now we find ourselves not merely witnessing a punishment carried out by a betrayed husband in the depths of despair, but the scenographic work of a pervert: that of Archibaldo, and perhaps above all, Buñuel.

IV

The Mercedes Pinto novel upon which *Él* is based is an autobiographical tale sandwiched between reputable discourses (legal and medical) at the beginning and end of the book, which offer scientific explanations, as well as practical ones, to the problems raised by the story.⁴ In each scene, the book sketches the psychological symptoms of a paranoiac with great acuteness, if with a certain lack of concern for the narrative articulation and recreation of the plot's period. Mercedes Pinto places herself as a passive and suffering subject of horrific, delirious actions who contemplates them from outside. Buñuel, on the other hand, imposes a significant change: he postpones Gloria's (Delia Garcés) story until he has placed the plot and its imaginary settings at the margin of the feminist viewpoint, that is to say, at a position external to the psychotic outburst.



The symptoms of paranoia in *Él*

The narrative perspective of the woman is only established later on through a flashback designed to evoke the torments of married life between Francisco (Arturo de Córdova) and Gloria, already manifest on their wedding night. In short, Buñuel offers the viewer the delirious subject's unmediated point of view.

So, this use of the point of view occurs specifically in the initial sequence that takes place in the church. Here too the complete separation from Mercedes Pinto's novel is notable: there is not a trace of religion in the novel. In Buñuel, on the other hand, not only does religion play an orienting role in contextualising the characters' conventions and their bourgeois, well-to-do world (the hero's beliefs, familiarity with the Church and its representatives, Francisco's becoming a monk in the end), but the Church itself, as far as physical and ceremonial space is concerned, becomes the stage upon which the following three passions are displayed: initial fascination (first sequence), mutual though unequal captivation when Gloria and Francisco meet for the second time (just a few scenes later), and the outburst of madness expressed as auditory and visual hallucination (the penultimate sequence of the film). Neither will the destiny of the hero of Mercedes Pinto's novel be the religious withdrawal to the Colombian monastery in which we see him at the end of the film, but rather the clinical coldness of an asylum. The reasons for these changes are similar to those that led Buñuel to replace an enigmatic episode concerning the heroine's torture by means of ropes and other implements with one of the most disturbing scenes in the history of film, Francisco's frustrated attempt to sew up her genitals.

The strategic presence of the Church cannot therefore be dismissed as lightly as has frequently been the case. I propose to spend some time on the first sequence of the film, as Francisco's expression is anchored, explained and unleashed from a ritual deeply codified in Catholic liturgy: the washing of the feet.

Él starts off *in medias res*. The opening shot shows candlesticks with white wax candles, enveloped by the smoke and, presumably, the smell of incense. We are inside a church. Following some altar boys with a pan to the left, the camera films the altar where, probably halfway through the Maundy Thursday mass, the ritual of the washing of the feet will take place. The customary simplicity of the Buñuelian staging, its sobriety, opens the way for certain marked features that emphasise particular aspects of the ceremony. In effect, the structure of the scenes is subordinate to a more precise revelation of the accessories and acts of the ritual. The movements of the camera, the reaction shots and the close-ups are subject to this same end. The liturgical ceremonial is here much more than a set without personality.

The sequence runs entirely without dialogue, but the canticle of the hymn *Ubi caritas et amor*, a Benedictine antiphony, the singing of which is mandatory

during the washing, creates an atmosphere of gravity. Two shots deserve special attention: the first of these ostentatiously isolates the kiss that the lips of the celebrant (later we will know that this is Father Velasco) deposit upon the naked and carefully washed foot of a clean-shaven youth. So emphatic is the gesture, so excessive even within the frame of the ceremony, that a reaction shot expresses the stupefaction, amazement, or perhaps the discomfort of the boy. The second track is by now constructed from a point of view internal to the narration, that of Francisco, and follows the priest's second kiss, no less emphasised, upon the naked foot of another child. Instinctively, Francisco, who has retained the detail, transports it to another place where feet, shod this time, are present in the act of worship. In the same way that the kissing of the feet – a symbol of humility and purity – is loaded with significance for the liturgical ceremony, it is also so, although in a different way, from the viewpoint of the fetishist observing them, and who, after running his eye over some worshippers' feet, returns to those of a woman wearing black shoes: the right foot – we must remember that it is precisely this one that should be kissed in the bathing ceremony – is more slightly forward, and both shoes have heels that highlight the instep. These, although not devoid of reverent discretion, display a feminine elegance absent in the feet of the other worshippers, where piety seems to have stifled any appearance of femininity. When the gaze rises up the legs, taking in the entire female body up to the face, the liturgical ritual will have become not yet the core of the scene, but rather a distant murmur that confers the enveloping atmosphere necessary for the beginning of a fascinated gaze irrevocably fixed on its object. The unknown woman will be aware of being beseeched by these proud and penetrating eyes, before which she will be capable of responding only with submission. The play between shot/counter-shot supporting this asymmetrical mixing of gazes, not really reciprocated, will thus become a telling and premonitory expression of the future relationship between the characters.

The importance of this sequence has not, of course, escaped the attention of the critics, though this has in general limited itself to retaining the fetishism without adequately considering the significance of the ritual staged at such a key moment of the film. It is hardly necessary to mention that, just as in the case in *Ensayo de un crimen*, the account of a meeting between a man and a woman is not only influenced, but also inspired by the sacred ceremony. Is this coincidental? Some attention to the ceremony's semantic roots seems necessary.

The washing of Maundy Thursday is a ritual deeply rooted in Catholic liturgy. Already appointed as such in the XVII Toledo Council (694), it evokes the act that the Gospel of Saint John (13, 4–9) attributes to Jesus during the Last Supper with his apostles. It is, then, a symbol of humility in which the celebrant,

originally Jesus, washes the feet of twelve, preferably poor, men, and follows a very precise ritual (Martínez de Antóñana, 1957, p. 1006).

The ceremony relies on special utensils: one or several jugs of water, a wash-bowl, towels, an alms bag (in the event that these are required during the ceremony), a cross with a purple veil, candlesticks with white wax candles, the missal with its lectern, a carpet on the steps of the dais, with perhaps fragrant flowers and herbs scattered about.⁵ Buñuel, whose library contained curious liturgical works, demonstrates knowledge not only of the technical details of the ritual, but also of their significance, so much so that he rewrites it in order to represent another scene within it: an erotic scene that differs from the well-established atmosphere of the former, but which through significant additions acquires a sacred dimension. This sacred character is precisely the point of departure for the description of a perverse diversion of the ritual in the direction of fetishism. The result is as follows: the erotic encounter is inseparable from a liturgical ritual; even more than that, it is metaphorically associated with it. Hardly, though, has the partial eroticisation been produced than it ends up becoming fascination, which causes the fetishistic characteristics to vanish momentarily in the interests of passion. In this way Buñuel inscribes the birth of desire in a ritual that, by its nature and significance, denies it. It is no accident that we are looking at a purification ritual, where the foot's nakedness is rigorously desexualised. Thus, the purifying operation is inverted: only because there is a purification ritual – the washing of the sinful that recalls Jesus' humble gesture during the Last Supper – can there be a harnessing of desire. Or, put another way, this latter is born from its supposed prohibition. Desire is born, therefore, from the pleasure taken in besmirching the ideal.

The idea that guides this behaviour is not strange to Buñuel: without the sensation of sin there is no intensity in desire, or more precisely, the latter emerges from the oppression imposed by the moral demands of Catholicism. If desire is always a pursuit for an object, neither reached nor possessed, Buñuel's peculiarity consists in this inaccessibility being interwoven with the fixed and codified ceremonial of religious ritual (the liturgy). To recapitulate: within the religious ritual of purification – Jesus' last act before the sacrament of the Eucharist, a ritual of humility – a fetishistic gaze that eroticises the ritual and displaces it towards an object that will forever retain the echoes of its link with liturgy is evident. The question once more arises: who is the fetishist, Francisco or Buñuel? Probably both.

For Buñuel Catholicism is a source of perverse pleasure; and this pleasure is nothing other than the pleasure of sin. The more imperative the rule, the more intense will be the pleasure derived from the transgression. In Buñuel's words: 'When, in spite of all the prohibitions, this desire could be satisfied, the physical

pleasure was incomparable, as it was always associated with this secret pleasure in sin' (1982, p. 52). Undoubtedly, there are Sadean overtones here, but limitations of space prohibit further commentary.

In reality, the hermetic, sophisticated and almost inextricable character of the liturgical ritual for the uninitiated is highlighted in several shots that show, among the worshippers who crowd into the church's nave, numerous Indians. These, being totally removed from the mysteries of the ceremonial, cannot participate in its eroticisation either. Buñuel, with his peculiar realism, introduces here traces of social criticism that denote an unexpected distancing in respect of the scene so intensely experienced.

V

Viridiana, at least in the first part, is full of religious references. The sarcastic nature of many of the allusions has been much studied (Sánchez Bióscas, 1999). Here, I shall limit discussion to the Angelus, halfway through the film.⁶ Buñuel contrasts the tasks of modernising the countryside undertaken by the tractors under Jorge's (Francisco Rabal) orders with the evening Angelus led by the young Viridiana with the apparent devotion of all her beggars. The two life plans and the two destinies that unravel on Don Jaime's estate are thus in clear opposition, so much so that the praying appears even more anachronistic by being juxtaposed with the destruction of the countryside. Two worlds, two groups of people who seem not to exist in time, thus meet face to face through the work and artistry of the staging. The Angelus would have been a part of Buñuel's education and he undermines this by contrasting it with the productivity of the real world.

Buñuel here returns to one of the great feminine myths of Christianity: Mary's virginity. We know that the Angelus celebrates the archangel's Annunciation to the Virgin, in which she learns that she will conceive the Son of God in her womb. This already alerts the viewer to Buñuel's linking of sexuality and religion. However, the choice of the liturgical fragment is complex. Buñuel must have been familiar with the interpretation by his ex-friend and co-scriptwriter of *Un chien andalou* (1929), Salvador Dalí, in a classic study of Surrealism, *El mito trágico del Ángelus de Millet* (1978), concerning the enigmatic work of the pious nineteenth-century painter, Jean-François Millet, by whom, however, a number of pornographic drawings were later discovered. The reference to the prayer belongs, therefore, to a complex web of allusions ranging from Millet's iconography to Dalí's text and interpretation. The fact that Dalí's original text was lost in 1941, following the forced evacuation of Paris caused by the German occupation, and was only published in a first French edition in 1963, made for an additional problem: had Buñuel seen the text in its entirety? Was it chance that caused the convergence of both readings?

In any case, Buñuel and Dalí had already referred to this canvas of Millet's in the title and still that closed *Un chien andalou*, which showed the two characters half-buried in the earth at the onset of spring, a pose reminiscent of that of the couple in the painting by Millet. Furthermore, Dalí's thesis was in the public domain, independent of the diffusion or otherwise of the written text. As will be remembered, Dalí's was a strange reading of the Millet painting, in which he created and applied his 'paranoid-critical' method. Having been captivated by what he called a 'primary delirious effect' coupled with an incomprehensible and inexpressible anguish, Dalí reconstructed a series of secondary effects triggered by reappearances in his experience of the work in question. This led him to comment on the existence of mysterious similarities between the pious disposition of the feminine figure in the painting and the position of the praying mantis and the male at the moment of coitus and prior to the terrible absorption by the female that characterises her violent and deadly sexual relations. If this were confirmed, stated Dalí, the painting would constitute a ceremony of death, replete with erotic elements evoking castration, the canvas being readable as a collage of various scenes superimposed on the snapshot of the painting (the before, during and after of copulation).

Such a bold and brilliant interpretation led Dalí to ask for a radiographic analysis of the lower part of the painting deposited in the Louvre Museum, convinced that beneath the painted earth there must be something that would irrevocably refer to death and incidentally confirm his delirious intuition. In fact, the analysis reveals the existence of a parallelepiped – drawn and later erased by Millet – that could well be, according to Dalí, a coffin. This, in his opinion, confirms the accuracy of his hypothesis, according to which something sinister is projected onto the religious features, combining death and the act of sex.

This is not the place to comment on Dalí's reading of the painting. My aim is to show that Buñuel, by returning to the Angelus, sets off a chain of Dalíesque imagery that invades the film *Viridiana*, as the presence of necrophilic elements and the union of religion and sex demonstrate. Moreover, if we look, for example, at shot 108 of the film, which appears a few minutes before the recital of the Angelus, we find something unusual. Viridiana poses for El Cojo, who is completing a pictorial composition in which she represents the Virgin surrounded by little angels. The girl, dressed in black, with a wimple and scarf around her head, is sitting on a rustic wheelbarrow like the one that features in the Millet painting, with the leaning woman who in Dalí's interpretation evoked the praying mantis. The similarity cannot be coincidental. Neither, however, can the perversion, as the *Angelus Domini* embodies in the Christian liturgy, as already mentioned, no more nor less than the Annunciation by the archangel Gabriel of the fate awaiting Mary. Viridiana serves, in effect, as a model for the

Virgin, but does so bringing to the scene the motives of Millet–Dalí and under the eyes of someone who perceives her as a virgin, El Cojo, precisely the person who tries to rape her in the orgy.

Something further can be added to the above. While Buñuel films this canvas just as the ‘devout painter’ El Cojo sees it, Refugio, Viridiana and El Poca, in the presence of the blind man, engage in the following conversation:

Viridiana (to Refugio): I need to know how long you’ve got before giving birth.

Refugio: Why?

Viridiana: To have the doctor prepared, of course.

Refugio: I don’t know. About four months, I think, but I couldn’t swear to it.

Poca: She doesn’t know who the father is either. She said it was night-time and she didn’t even see his face.

Refugio: Shut up! I didn’t tell you so that you could go around broadcasting it.

Don Amalio: Enough! That’s no way to talk, especially in front of our guardian saint, who is a decent person.

The specific subject of the conversation is maternity and virginity and its tone is perverse: just as the Virgin is conceived through the Holy Spirit, that is to say through divine grace, so too is Refugio ignorant of the identity of the man who made her pregnant. Buñuel’s gesture is born of humour, not merely of blasphemy. In this respect, *Viridiana* is distanced from *L’Âge d’or*, as well as from Buñuel’s intellectual French productions of around 1970.

VI

To conclude, as demonstrated in the examples discussed above, and also in others precluded from discussion for lack of space, the aim of *Él* is not to attack religion – as was the case, for instance, in *L’Âge d’or* – but to use one of its most essential elements, the liturgy, as a means of articulating the narrative. Liturgy relies, after all, on a ritualised symbolic universe, upon which the pervert can create, in turn, his own – though admittedly different – rituals. The pervert’s mind invents scenes, in a process that eroticises the objects but in general is governed by monotony – of a type that perhaps only de Sade has been able to enliven. So Buñuel develops these scenes from previous ones, and remains surprisingly faithful to their symbolic function. The fact that desire is linked to specific expressions of Catholic ritual does not undermine their importance. On the contrary, it makes it a necessary condition of pleasure.

Of course, these are by no means Buñuel’s only concerns here. The fantasy-fuelled assaults on the woman’s body and on realism are also special targets. Nevertheless, the pleasure in perversity and the humour of many of Buñuel’s

films are totally incomprehensible without awareness of these rituals. When all is said and done, atheist or not, Buñuel is incomprehensible without reference to Catholic liturgy, before which he could never adopt an objective position. 'I am an atheist,' said the man from Calanda, 'thank God.'

Translated by John McCarthy

Notes

1. As is known, *Viridiana*, produced by UNINCI, Films 59 and Gustavo Alatríste was awarded the Palme d'or *ex aequo* with Henry Colpi's *Une si longue absence*. The prize was received by the Director General of Cinematography and Theatre, José Muñoz Fontán. But a furious attack published the following day in *L'Osservatore romano*, describing the film as obscene and sacrilegious, resulted in the summary dismissal of the Spanish official.
2. Popular naiveté – the Devil in the form of a dove who tries to hunt the Holy Spirit with a shotgun – that is not separate from brimming carnality and a reading of the aforementioned original sin as lust. Let us not forget that this is about the representation of original sin and that this is identified with lust.
3. A universe of reference that is not far from a certain popular vein in Buñuel: for example, *Susana* (1950) responds to this fairy-tale imagery which serves as an intertext for it and which is sustained throughout the film by the old maid. Without a doubt, this makes possible the exaggeration, as well as the humour this hyperbole entails.
4. Two texts precede Mercedes Pinto's: 'To Mercedes Pinto. By Way of a Prologue', by the legal adviser Jaime Torrubbiano Ripoll, reflecting on the legitimacy of divorce, and 'Preface', by Professor of Psychiatry at Montevideo, Santín Carlos Rossi, who deals with paranoia. At the end of the story, two texts guard the volume with their science: an 'Epilogue', credited to Doctor Julio Camino Galicia, and 'A Final Opinion', by the legal adviser and writer Valero Martín. See Pinto (1989).
5. The ritual is as follows:

If the washing takes place during the Mass. After the homily the Priest goes to the seat and sits down; the holy Ministers, prior to genuflecting at the altar, go to the entry to the presbytery, or the church nave, near the pews, and invite the men chosen for the washing and guide them two by two to the designated place. They genuflect two by two and salute the Priest, then sit at their positions and bare the right foot. – Meanwhile the singing of the antiphons commences; these are sung throughout the washing, so that towards the end the eighth one, that is the hymn *Ubi caritas et amor*, is begun, the others being omitted if necessary.