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# Saturday Review



SR GOES TO THE MOVIES

## The Novice's Story

**L**UIS BUNUEL's "Viridiana" is as bold a film as has come to us recently, filled with erotic and religious imagery, perhaps deliberately paradoxical so far as its meaning is concerned, and yet clear and uncompromising in the march of its incidents. If its implications were religious alone, it might be regarded as the chronicle of a young woman's fall from grace, but Bunuel has never been known for his adherence to doctrine. He would seem rather to be dealing with the theme of the corruption of innocence, as Viridiana, a novice in a Spanish convent, makes what she supposes to be her final encounter with the world before taking her vows. That world—a vaguely contemporary one—is the world of a religion-dominated Spain, but it is also one in which the hierarchies have begun to lose their definition. Something is rotten, in other words, and Viridiana can only struggle vainly against the prevailing corruption.

She visits her uncle Don Jaime, a widower who lives on a large farm that is going to seed, and he sees in her the living incarnation of his dead wife, for whom he still has a necrophiliac kind of worship. Viridiana is beautiful, a young woman whose innate passion has been turned toward religious symbols. The large wooden cross she keeps with her is implied by Bunuel to have both a religious and a phallic significance, her pious laceration (she sleeps on a crown of thorns) to have a basis of masochistic eroticism. In this strange atmosphere, the events take on a diseased quality. Don Jaime's twisted desire for the girl leads him to attempt her seduction while she is asleep, and afterwards, profoundly guilt-stricken, to destroy himself.

Even stranger events follow. Viridiana, obsessed by guilt, too, takes it upon herself to rescue a group of diseased beggars. She puts them up at the farm, which she shares with Don Jaime's son, a young, easygoing materialist who has brought his mistress with him. In the film's climactic scene, a wild and shocking orgy of the beggars occurs in the handsome dining room of the main house of the farm. It is a stunning sequence pictorially, obscene and brutal, a chillingly observed parody of "The Last Supper." The impact of innocence upon the corrupt has resulted in a greater corruption, in extremes of behavior which at last victimize Viridiana, who has been foolish enough, even blasphemous enough, to look, upon her-

self as a provider of salvation. Ravished, humbled, she joins the world, no better now, no worse than those she has held herself aloof from.

This summary hardly suggests the emotional force of the film; for within the framework of the incidents are seemingly minor details (a crucifix opens into a knife, Viridiana burns her cherished crown of thorns) which build a powerful atmosphere. Disturbing, too, is the implication that, unless controlled, the destructive forces in human nature will emerge, that the fate of purity is profanation, that beauty breeds possessiveness. There is a suggestion that a rigid, encrusted religious system cannot cope with these forces, and that sicknesses within society are not the business of individuals, but of society.

If the film were less well made, if it were not so strikingly written and directed by Bunuel, it could be dismissed as sensationalism, with a too easy emphasis on the sexual elements. But its artistry is unquestionable. Bunuel has touched on these themes before—on sexuality, religion, irrational violence, and death—but never so well as in this case. And curiously, it derives force from the omission of a final, messagelike statement. It is left to us to find its meanings. The acting, by the way, is impeccable. Sylvia Pinal, as Viridiana, continually suggests the banked fires of a young woman caught between religious and carnal desires. Fernando Rey, as Don Jaime, is pathetic as he indulges in his middle-aged fetishism; Francisco Rabal, as his son, has a handsome arrogance.

The film, made in Spain, won last year's Grand Prix at Cannes, was immediately banned in the country of its origin, and the Spanish government was also successful in having the film banned in France. Perhaps the Spanish authorities saw into it too deeply. Films that deal with the spiritual and sensual diseases in individuals and societies are not, in themselves, necessarily corrupt. Nor is this one. Bunuel has dealt with life passionately; this, after all, is what we ask of artists.

NOTE: Edward L. Kingsley, the American importer of "Viridiana," died suddenly on January 31 of this year. For many years he had exercised notable taste and judgment in the importation of films from abroad, and helped spread the audience for foreign films of excellence. He will be missed.

—HOLLIS ALPERT.