

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## ***Viridiana* (1961)**

Luis Buñuel (1900-1983)

### OVERVIEW

**Auteur** Luis Buñuel is known as one of most influential surrealist filmmakers of the mid-twentieth century. Although he was born and raised near Zaragoza, Spain, he spent a large portion of his life and career as an exile in Paris and Mexico City. One of his earliest short films, *Le chien andalou*, or the *Andalusian Dog*, became an iconic representation of eerie surrealist art in which Buñuel presented the audience with a series of unsettling, violent, and even erotic images plucked from a dream. Buñuel would continue in his surrealist style with such films as *L'Age D'or* (1930), or the *Age of Gold*. Later in his career, the director adapted novels and short stories to film and used the narratives to criticize the Francoist regime and expose the Catholic repression of the era. *Viridiana* is considered one of Buñuel's best satirical films of his later period, along with his scathing critique of the bourgeoisie in *The Exterminating Angel* (1962) and *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972).

**Film** *Viridiana* (1961), a black and white, full-length film, is considered to be one of Buñuel's best cinematic achievements and an exemplar of his signature style. In fact, Buñuel himself proclaimed: "I am Viridiana." The title character is an aspiring nun (novice) who must resist the sexual advances of her uncle, Don Jaime. Although the basic plot of the film is adapted from Benito Pérez Galdós's novel *Halma* (1895), Buñuel and writer Julio Alejandro use the film to critique the Francoist dictatorship and the repression of the Catholic Church of the mid-twentieth century. In classic Buñuel style, the narrative is less a series of events and more about using symbolic images and eroticism to create an uneasy feeling in the viewer. The references to Catholic iconography and Biblical stories abound, from Viridiana's name—an homage to a saint who imprisoned herself in a hermitage--to a scene in which the title character offers her uncle an apple à la Eve in the Garden of Eden.

**Background** Despite living in exile in Mexico for twenty years, Buñuel returned to Spain to shoot the film on location. The director cast his favorite male actors, Fernando Rey and Francisco Arrabal, as the obsessive uncle Jaime and bastard son Jorge, respectively. *Viridiana* is played by Silvia Pinal, a Mexican actress who looked strikingly similar to Buñuel's other blond muse, Catherine Deneuve. The debut of the film received praise and censure in equal measure. *Viridiana* won the Palme d'Or at the 1961 Cannes Festival, yet it was condemned by the Vatican as blasphemous. While many Spanish critics voted for *Viridiana* as the best Spanish film of all time, it was banned and censored in Spain until 1977 (two years after Franco's death).

### SYNOPSIS

Set in the 1960s in Spain, *Viridiana* tells the story of a young aspiring nun and her inappropriate relationships with her uncle, Don Jaime, and her cousin, Jorge. The first third of the film is characterized by Jaime's obsessive desire towards his niece. From the moment she arrives at the estate, Don Jaime is immediately struck by Viridiana's beauty and her resemblance to his late wife. During her initial visit, Jaime drugs Viridiana's tea and almost rapes her.

Although Jaime confesses to Viridiana and asks for her forgiveness, she rejects his apology and runs back to the convent. Don Jaime commits suicide by hanging himself with a jumping rope. As a result, Viridiana is forced to return to the house to look after the estate, where she meets Jorge and his girlfriend Lucía.

The second half of the film involves Jorge and Viridiana's tense relationship as they navigate repairs to the estate and their mutual attraction. Viridiana invites the village's poor and disabled to live in the house,

much to the chagrin of Jorge and Lucía. Lucía senses that Jorge is drawn to his cousin, and she leaves the estate.

The climax of the film occurs when the members of the household go into town and the beggars take advantage of the absence. After enjoying a banquet, the festivities end in fighting and vandalism. Upon their return, Jorge and Viridiana are attacked, and Viridiana is almost raped by two of the beggars.

Despite the shock of yet another near-rape, Viridiana stays at the house with Jorge. The final scene is a shot of the Jorge, Ramona, and Viridiana playing cards. The last line of the film underscores the implied ménage à trois, as Jorge remarks: "You know, the first time I saw you, I thought: My cousin and I will end up shuffling the deck together."

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

<i>Viridiana</i>	A beautiful, aspiring nun
<i>Don Jaime</i>	Widower and Viridiana's uncle
<i>Jorge</i>	Don Jaime's illegitimate son and Viridiana's cousin
<i>Lucía</i>	Jorge's girlfriend
<i>Ramona</i>	Don Jaime's maid
<i>Rita</i>	Ramona's younger daughter
<i>Moncho</i>	The caretaker at Don Jaime's estate
<i>Don Zequiél</i>	The patriarch of the beggars
<i>José el Leproso</i>	The beggar with leprosy
<i>Don Amalio</i>	The blind beggar interested in Enedina
<i>Enedina</i>	The poor mother who prepares the banquet
<i>"El Cojo"</i>	The lame beggar

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### VIRIDIANA

As an aspiring nun, Viridiana incarnates many of the virtues of the Church, yet her beauty also masks a latent attraction to vice. She caters to the poor, but she also continually judges the other characters. She maintains her purity until the very end of the film, yet she also tempts those around her.

*Erotic* As a sexualized object of the male gaze, Viridiana is framed as a beautiful portrait that is looked at by not only the male characters, but also by the viewers and Buñuel himself. Even the beggars wish to paint her portrait in order to capture her beauty. The male desire thrown at Viridiana increases the sexual tension throughout the whole film. In addition, Viridiana's virginity heightens her eroticism in that she is forbidden fruit.

*Charitable* Viridiana attempts to serve the community through consistent charitable actions: she feeds the poor, she hears their confessions, and she heals the wounded and diseased. Despite the protests of Jorge, she allows the poor to live and dine on the estate. When the leper and other beggars are oppressed or bullied, Viridiana comforts them and encourages them to lead a pure life.

*Judgmental* Viridiana refuses to forgive Don Jaime despite his remorse. Even after her uncle's suicide, Viridiana condemns him. In later scenes with Jorge, Viridiana expresses disdain toward Jorge's promiscuous nature and loose relationship with his girlfriend Lucia.

### DON JAIME

Although Don Jaime hangs himself relatively early in the film, his character sets the tone of illicit sexuality for the scenes following his death. The viewers know immediately that he is a lonely widower who is sexually attracted to his niece. We soon discover that Jaime is conflicted about his desire and his violation of Viridiana, hence his suicide.

*Obsessive* Rather than merely mourning the death of his wife, Don Jaime broods over her death and cherishes her wedding dress and veil. His compulsions to stroke the dress and wear the shoes suggests not only his fetishistic tendencies, but also his inability to live in the present moment. Although he does

not spend much time with Viridiana, Jaime becomes fixated on his niece as both his late wife's doppelganger and a future wife. His obsession becomes so strong that he drugs and nearly rapes Viridiana.

*Guilty* Although his desire towards Viridiana never wanes, Jaime is also aware of the consequences of his illicit desire. He knows that he will ruin his niece's virginity and chastity, and his fear of sinning prevents him from raping Viridiana while she is unconscious. His suicide acts as the ultimate confession.

## **JORGE**

Like his father, Jorge is immediately attracted to Viridiana. Unlike his father, Jorge does not feel guilt or obsession. Instead, Jorge enjoys each flirtatious or erotic encounter as an opportunity to live in the moment. Along with bringing his girlfriend Lucia, Jorge seduces the servant Ramona in the attic and does not apologize for his attraction to his cousin. Jorge's main preoccupation is the development and renovation of the estate.

*Practical* Rather than mourn over his father, Jorge immediately sets out to improve the estate. He does not shy away from his wants or needs, nor does he express anger towards his identity as a bastard son. Rather, Jorge considers his status and his relationships as parts of life to be addressed in the moment. When Lucía leaves him and the estate, he takes the breakup in stride. Even when Jorge rescues the dog from being tied to the cart, he does so in part because he knows that the dog will eventually strangle itself—and it is better to have a live, working dog than a dead one.

*Promiscuous* Although it is suggested that Jorge and Lucia are in an actual relationship, Jorge thinks little of seducing Ramona and sleeping with Viridiana. In the last scene of the film, he freely entertains and even advocates a threesome. His laissez faire attitude towards sex suggests that he follows his desire in the moment and cares little about having a life partner.

## **RAMONA**

As the primary servant of the estate, Ramona is not very developed as a character. She is Rita's mother, and she serves Don Jaime faithfully. Yet, her words and actions underscore the themes of illicit desire throughout the film, and she is one of three characters who stay on the estate after the beggars' vandalism.

*Empathetic* Along with performing her daily duties, Ramona is very tuned into the fears, worries, and desires of those who live on the estate. She facilitates the drugging and near-rape of Viridiana, and she is also the person who helps Don Jaime to propose to his niece. When Jorge comes to live on the estate, she assists him in organizing and cleaning up, and she gives herself over to his desire.

*Lustful* The implication is that Ramona is a lonely widow who also craves affection and sex. It is likely that she lives vicariously through Viridiana, as she feels devotion towards Don Jaime. Soon after Jorge's arrival, Ramona gazes at him longingly. Later, Ramona is a willing sexual partner to Jorge in the attic, and she also appears to be open to the ménage à trois at the end of the film.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. How is Viridiana's character complex and contradictory? Is she more like the Virgin Mary, Eve, Jesus, or her namesake saint? What other references do you see with respect to Viridiana as a character? Note: Buñuel himself compares the wedding dress scene to Sleeping Beauty.
2. Consider the frequent use of bestial symbolism and metaphor in *Viridiana*: the cow, the drowning bee, the exhausted cart dogs, the cat and mouse, and the references to the black bull in Rita's nightmare. What do the animals symbolize? Are the animals stand-ins for the characters?
3. Consider the focus and close-ups on objects throughout the film: the wedding shoes and veil, the jump ropes, feet, and the crucifix-knife, among others. Why does Buñuel focus on the characters' feet so often? What do these objects symbolize?
4. How does Buñuel critique the Francoist regime? Why did the Catholic Church consider this film blasphemous?

5. In his early years as a filmmaker (the 1920s and 1930s), Buñuel was considered at the vanguard of the surrealist movement. Look up a few key traits of surrealism. Do you see surrealist techniques or images in this film?
6. How is Buñuel in dialogue with other filmmakers of the 1950s and 1960s? Do you see similar stylistic choices to other European auteurs such as Saura, Godard, Felini, and Hitchcock?

## SCENES

**Goodbye to the Convent** Viridiana walks the plaza with her Mother Superior at the convent. Viridiana admits that Don Jaime is her last living relative and that he lost his wife. The Mother Superior suggests that the novice visit her uncle before she takes her vows, and Viridiana agrees reluctantly.



**Meeting Don Jaime** Upon arriving at Don Jaime's estate, Viridiana walks the forest and orchard area with her uncle. Rita, Ramona's daughter, plays and looks at them from above. Don Jaime continues to study his niece and compare her to his late wife, saying that Viridiana even moves like her aunt. The camera pans down to both characters' feet, where Jaime is tracing lines in the dirt.



**A Bed on the Floor** Viridiana prepares for her first night at the estate. She sits on the bed and pulls down her stockings. The viewer sees that she has laid out a mat on the floor.



**Just Pull Hard** The next morning, Viridiana is walking the estate and enters the barn. She sees Moncho, the caretaker, milking the cow with great skill. Viridiana asks for a cup of milk, and Moncho suggests that she try milking the cow. She does so but is struggling to squeeze the udders correctly. Moncho facilitates by saying "Just pull hard!" and the milk sprays out. When she leaves the barn, she encounters Don Jaime and they walk around the pens. The camera zooms in on a bee rolling in the water of a trough. Don Jaime stretches out a straw to allow the bee to get out, and Viridiana remarks that he saved the bee from drowning.

**Sleepwalker** During her second night at the estate, Viridiana falls asleep. Don Jaime stays up and opens the wedding chest in the master bedroom. He lifts up his late wife's wedding dress and veil and caresses them both. He then puts on the white pumps on his right foot. Meanwhile, Viridiana enters the room in a sleepwalking trance. She walks over to the fireplace, kneels, and retrieves ashes from the fire. Then, she throws the ashes on top of the white sheets of the master bed and leaves the room.



**Don Jaime's Plan** The next day, Ramona tells Jorge that Viridiana awoke early and is preparing to go back to the convent. Jaime expresses his frustration that his niece denies him when he asks her to stay, and he asks Ramona for help. Later, Viridiana peels an apple and serves it to her uncle. She asks him why he didn't wake her when she was sleepwalking, and he responded that it is dangerous. Don Jaime attempts to propose to his niece but ends up beating around the bush. Ramona, the servant of the estate, intervenes by telling Viridiana that he wishes to marry her. She says no, but she agrees to reappear in the living room area wearing her aunt's wedding dress. Don Jaime cues Ramona to drug the tea and serve it to Viridiana.



**Nightmare with the Black Bull** Moncho is eating his supper in the barn, and Rita, Ramona's young daughter, enters and approaches. She reveals that she is afraid of a black bull in her bedroom. Moncho calls her a liar and asks how a bull could get into the house. Rita replies that it could have come in through the cupboard. Moncho hands the girl a piece of cheese and tells her to go to her mother when she has nightmares.



**The Near-Rape** After drinking the drugged tea, Viridiana loses consciousness. Jaime carries her limp body to the master bedroom. He proceeds to lay her out with her arms crossed, but then he opens her blouse and kisses her face and bosom. The camera cuts to Rita, Ramona's young daughter, watching the scene from the outside. Suddenly, Jaime catches himself, re-buttons her blouse, and leaves the room.



**Viridiana's Departure** The morning after the near-rape, Viridiana awakens disorientated and being tended to by Ramona. Don Jaime enters the room and confesses that he raped her last night and therefore, she cannot return to the convent. He leaves the room to speak with Ramona, and he asks her to tell Viridiana the truth. He then returns to explain that he only raped her "in thought", and he asks for forgiveness. Viridiana rejects his confession, packs hurriedly, and leaves the estate in a carriage. Don Jaime sits at his desk and write a letter.



**Suicide** Viridiana has returned to the convent but receives news that Don Jaime has committed suicide. Outside in the forest, we see one of Rita's jump ropes hanging, and we realize he hung himself at that particular tree with the jump rope. Viridiana goes back to the estate and meets with the Mother Superior, who ask her why Don Jaime killed himself. She does not explain and continues to condemn her uncle, and the Mother Superior warns her of too much pride.



**Beggars arrive after Jorge and Lucía's Arrival** Viridiana decides to cater to the poor beggars in the town. She walks to the church to pray and meets with a group of beggars: two mothers, a blind man, two lame men, and an elder beggar. While Viridiana is leading the beggars to live with her on the estate, Jorge and Lucía have already arrived and have begun to survey the house and the land. From the window, they see Viridiana and the group of beggars approaching. Don Amalio, the blind beggar asks about the number of windows in the estate, and the others describe how big and luxurious it is. Upon seeing the beggars entering the house, both Moncho and Rita yell at them and show their displeasure.



**Two Dinners** As night falls, both the beggars and Jorge and Lucía sit down to have dinner. Ramona prepares the meal. As she is carrying a bowl to the table, she gazes longingly at Jorge and drops the bowl. Meanwhile, the beggars are eating and conversing at the big dining table. Don Zequiél and Don Amalio continue to insult each other and squabble until Viridiana enters the dining room. José el Leproso reveals his infected arm when cutting the bread, and the other beggars try to throw him out. Viridiana says he can stay and assures everyone that she will find them tasks that suit their skills and talents in the morning.



## JORGE

**Jorge Visits Viridiana** Later that night, Jorge enters Viridiana's room without knocking. Despite Viridiana's annoyance, he proceeds to tell her of his plans for the estate: growing crops and installing electricity in the home. She agrees to his plans but indicates that she will not be participating in the renovations.

**Painting in the Plaza** Viridiana visits a young pregnant woman, Refugio, and the lame beggar, El Cojo. The latter is painting a cubist-style portrait of the virgin, and he suggests that Viridiana pose for him, as this will make the virgin even more beautiful. Viridiana agrees, and she advises Refugio to see a doctor to make sure her pregnancy goes smoothly. The other beggars ask for money to buy groceries, and Viridiana gives them a few bills and instructions on what to buy. Then, she goes to look at the Cojo's painting and praises him.



**Jorge Rescues a Dog** Jorge continues to survey and measure the land, and he discusses planting wheat. When a cart with a dog tied underneath passes by, Jorge approaches the owner and asks why the dog cannot ride in the cart with the other passengers. The owner replies that the cart is for humans only, and Jorge warns that the dog is too exhausted to keep running. When the owner shows little concern, Jorge asks to buy the dog, and the owner releases him. Just as the purchased dog is freed, the viewer sees another cart approaching in the opposite direction, also with a dog tied to and running in the undercarriage.

**Jorge and Viridiana Disagree** When Viridiana comes upon Jorge, he tells her of his plans. She replies that she knows nothing about farming. One of the beggars approaches, and Jorge yells at him to leave. Viridiana asks if he wants the beggars to leave, and he answers yes. Viridiana explains that it is her calling to administer to the local poor even if it is only a small group of beggars. She then goes to comfort José the leper and tends to the wounds on his arm.



**Lucía and Jorge Break Up** Later that night, Jorge is going through his uncle's jewels and trinkets. He picks up a metal cross and pulls out a pocket knife from the side. Lucía complains that she has nothing to do on the estate. She also confronts Jorge about his obvious attraction to Viridiana. Rather than deny it, Jorge simply replies that life brings some people together and pushes others apart.



**Prayers and Renovations** Jorge continues to oversee construction on the estate while Viridiana leads the beggars in the Angelus prayer in a clearing. The camera cuts back and forth between chopping wood and the recitations of the beggars in a circle. Afterwards, Moncho approaches Viridiana and quits his position. She tries to change his mind but acknowledges that he doesn't like living with the beggars. She then has a conversation with Jorge in which he reveals the Lucía has left. When Viridiana asks about their relationship, Jorge replies that he doesn't want to offend her delicate nature.



**Tryst in the Attic** Jorge and Ramona are in the attic and planning to go through the mess. Jorge asks if his father ever mentioned him, and Ramona replies that he did not. The two exchange an erotically charged look, and Jorge leans in to kiss Ramona. He then takes her hand and suggests that they "sit down" across the room. The camera pans slowly across the attic and stops on the bed. A rat is walking across the bedspread when a cat suddenly pounces on it.





**Going Into Town** Viridiana prepares to go into town to meet with a lawyer about the estate. Ramona, Jorge, and Rita decide to accompany her as Rita is suffering from a toothache. Before leaving, Viridiana counsels Don Zequiél to watch over the beggars in their absence. As soon as the carriage is out of sight, El Cojo and Don Amalio suggest that Enedina roast the lambs and make her famous custard. She warns them that a banquet takes time, and they reply that they have all the time in the world.

**Destruction of the Dining Hall** The beggars and disabled assemble in the great dining hall and eat the roasted lamb and homemade custard that Enedina has prepared. The babies are left on the nearby sofa while everyone drinks and dances. As the beggars become more drunk, they begin to ransack the house, including dancing with the wedding dress and veil. When one suggests a picture of the party, they all pose in the style of the Last Supper, and one of the women lifts her skirt as if she is taking a picture. In the last moments of the party, one of the beggars pulls Enedina down behind the couch and rapes her. Don Amalio hears of what they are doing and smashes the glasses with his cane. When the beggars hear the masters coming back, most of them flee the house.



**Attempted Rape** Although most of the beggars ran away when the car approaches, José el Leproso and El Cojo are still in the upper bedroom. Jaime surveys the damage of the dining room, and Viridiana goes upstairs where she is flung on the bed by El Cojo. Jorge comes up to rescue her and is hit on the head by José, who ties him up and watches the rape. Jorge tries to get José to either release him or kill El Cojo before he manages to penetrate Viridiana. José says that he's next, but Jorge promises him cash if he kills El Cojo. José agrees, whacks El Cojo, and is counting the cash until the police arrive.

**huffling the Deck** The final scene takes place a few days later with the house supposedly cleaned up. Jorge and Ramona are alone together in the bedroom, and Ramona begins to caress him. Viridiana knocks on the door and enters when Jorge answers. He invites Viridiana in to sit down and play cards as a threesome. Jorge deals the cards, saying that he knew he would end up "shuffling the deck" with his cousin.

