

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Susan Smith Nash, Ph.D.

BUGAMBILIA (1945)

Emilio Fernández

Melodrama – Spanish

OVERVIEW

Not one of director Emilio Fernández's most popular films, but perhaps his most gothic, the film mixes familiar themes of class conflict and small victories of the underdog with a father's obsession with his daughter, Amalia, who is the mirror image of his long-dead wife. The father, Don Fernando, is the owner and operator of the largest and deepest mine in the Mexican mining district of Guanajuato, where terrible accidents occur, leaving miners entombed alive and their families raging against the poor working conditions and pay. Within this context, the smart and determined mine supervisor establishes his own mine in order to have sufficient resources to make himself worthy of asking the mine owner for his daughter's hand in marriage. It is to no avail, not only because of the social class disparity, but primarily because the mine owner cannot let the living simulacrum of his long-dead wife leave his home. Amalia and Ricardo attempt to marry against her father's will, triggering a series of tragic events. Bugambilia is a Lacanian gothic, which is to say that desire and longing for the ideal are at the core of the plot, and the more intense the desire, the more unattainable the object of the desire is. The real is subsumed by fantasy; the father sees his dead wife living through the daughter, Amalia. Ricardo, the supervisor, sees self-actualization through dressing as a charro and representing that he has had a lucky strike when he went on his own and started to prospect for gold for his own gold mine.

MAIN CHARACTERS

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| Amalia de los Robles | Beautiful daughter of the richest man in Guanajuato |
| Ricardo Rojas | Supervisor in mine, in love with Amalia |
| Don Fernando de los Robles | Amalia's father |
| Luis Felipe | Suitor for Amalia's hand in marriage |
| Zarca | Amalia's maid |
| Cura | Priest |

SYNOPSIS

Amalia de los Robles lives with her father in a vast mansion in Guanajuato, where Don Fernando is the owner of the largest mine in this important mining district. Amalia's mother died when she was young, leaving her husband (Amalia's father), grief-stricken with loss. When Amalia grows up to look exactly like her mother did, Don Fernando becomes obsessed with her and controls every aspect of her life. She is pampered but constrained. One day, there is an accident at Don Fernando's mine. As she races to find out if her father has been hurt, Amalia runs into Ricardo Rojas, a supervisor at the mine who is helping injured miners and their terrified families. It is love at first sight for Ricardo, and he only learns later that Amalia is the daughter of the man he blames for the dangerous working conditions and poor wages at the mine. The attraction is mutual, and soon Amalia and Ricardo have declared their love for each other. The union is opposed by Don Fernando, who cannot bear to have her leave him, not only because Ricardo is of a lower social rank, but also because by keeping the mirror image of his dead wife near him, he assuages the pain of loss. Ricardo persists, however, and in his best charro regalia, he asks Don Fernando for Amalia's hand in marriage. Don Fernando threatens the life of Ricardo. Determined to succeed, Ricardo leaves to prospect for gold. He is fortunate and soon has a very profitable mine, which he describes in regular letters home to Amalia. Amalia begs him to return so they can be married, and so he obliges. Contracting a priest to marry them on the steps of the cathedral, Ricardo is filled with joy. However, the joyous occasion turns to horror as Don Fernando approaches with a gun and shoots

Ricardo dead. Later in his trial for the murder of Ricardo, Don Fernando shoots himself in the head, putting an end to his own life. Grief-stricken, Amalia retreats to an underground part of her home, where she lives in candle-lit twilight and plays her piano. She explains to a concerned priest that she has turned her home into a mausoleum, and there she plans to live out the rest of her days.

PLOT

Amalia At home, Amalia is equally pampered in luxuries unthinkable to miners and other workers in Guanajuato. In this scene, she is relaxing in a warm bath made fragrant with flower petals. As the pampered, self-absorbed and privileged daughter of the owner of the richest silver mine in the mining town of Guanajuato, Amalia de los Robles makes sure that she is in the center of attention, even in church at the Sunday celebration of the mass. Amalia is a gifted pianist and she graces an evening soiree with her presence, and also her performance of Chopin's Revolutionary Etude. Don Fernando looks at his daughter Amalia, with peculiar devotion. She is the image of her mother, who was absolutely adored by Don Fernando. Consequently, he is protective, controlling, jealous, and ambitious for her. Behind him stands Luis Felipe, a young man of their social set who is in love with Amalia.



Accident in Mine There is a terrible mining accident in the mine owned by her father. It is said that the mine was dangerously poorly maintained, and there were inadequate safety measures or protocols to protect the miners. Amalia, a vision in fluffy, light, bright fabric, hat, and ruffles, races to the mine to make sure her father is unharmed. As she runs as quickly (and gracefully) as she can, she encounters Ricardo Rojas, a low-level mine foreman. There many fatalities in the mine accident and Amalia is terrified that perhaps something has happened to her father. The mise-en-scene in this scene emphasizes the facelessness of the workers who are dehumanized as they are exploited.



Marriage proposal Dressed in his best, Ricardo Rojas comes to Don Fernando's home to express his intentions and his desire to marry Amalia. He is dressed as a charro, which indicates his skill in horsemanship and his participation in the charreada, which is highly regarded in Mexican culture. He holds his ornate sombrero in his hand in a sign of respect. Don Fernando is outraged by Ricardo's attentions to his daughter and refuses to allow them to marry. Discouraged by the fact that all his marriage proposals are thwarted by Don Fernando, Ricardo goes prospecting with his burro. He hopes to find mineralization so that Amalia's father will accept him (little does he suspect that nothing will make any difference because the real issue is that Don Fernando is fixated on the living image of his dead wife. Ricardo finds gold and begins corresponding with Amalia. she writes him letters telling him how much she loves him – at one point she says she cannot endure more and begs Ricardo to take her away so they can be married and together



Ricardo returns Don Fernando is not happy to see Ricardo in his home, regardless of the wealth or Amalia's love. He threatens to shoot. As good as his word, Don Fernando gets out his pistol and prepares himself to shoot Ricardo. As good as his word, Don Fernando gets out his pistol and prepares himself to shoot Ricardo.



Ricardo and Don Fernando die. Ricardo is shot by Don Fernando. Ricardo dies in Amalia's arms. During his trial, Don Fernando shoots himself during the trial thus committing suicide.



Amalia withdraws from life. Luis Felipe comes to plead Amalia for her hand and to rescue her from her self-imposed isolation. She explains that she is dead – the viewer assumes “dead to the world,” but the camera work later suggests that she may be in reality dead. Amalia explains that her home is her tomb – it is dark and lit by candles. She plays the piano (a dirge), and the camera lifts and shows that she does seem to be living in a mortuary – a literal mortuary or vast tomb occupied by other dead people.



THEMES

Class differences: Guanajuato is an ideal location for story of Bugambilia because it was one of the first mining towns to be developed by the Spaniards, and was so well established that the Catholic Church even used it as a center of the Inquisition in the 1500s. This historical framing is part of what gives Bugambilia its undertones of darkness, cruelty, and intolerance. The class differences between the mine owners, who were registered as “blanco” or “Peninsular,” and then the miners who were usually registered as “mestizo” were insuperable. It meant social oblivion to anyone from the elite class who married “down.” It was not only a negative for the individual, but for the entire family.

Doomed Love: The more impossible the love the more it is desired. The fact that Don Fernando so harshly opposes the idea of a marriage between his daughter, Amalia, and the lowly Ricardo Rojas, makes the star-crossed love all the more desirable, with the requisite elements of a romantic love of gothic intensity: desire, death, rigid social hierarchy, and the inevitability of tragedy, which alludes to archetypal notions of fate, a desire for a transcendent love (unity of souls) which ultimately will be ruptured (rapturous unity is too rarified and beautiful for our world).

Death: While the story seems at first blush to be about star-crossed lovers and class differences, the cinematography and the music make it clear that it's really about death, and more specifically, about being buried alive. The film opens with the vibrant Amalia who is imbued with life and vitality, but once one realizes that she is the image of her mother, the suggestion is that it is in reality, the mother's body. The idea is reinforced by the fact that the actress playing Amalia looks about 20 years older than she supposed is. The accident in the mine reinforces the notion of being buried alive and a place where one lives is turned into a mortuary. When Amalia plays the piano (principally Chopin), she is showy and dramatic; the performances and the cinematography evoke a “Phantom of the Opera” sense. Guanajuato's famed mummies are alluded to in *Bugambilia* with the repeated references to being buried alive, and also being dug up after being buried. In Guanajuato, a cholera outbreak in 1833 meant there was no room in the cemeteries. To make room, the dead were removed from their crypts and their remains moved to mortuary which was called an “ossorium” (bone room) if their relatives would not pay an annual fee to maintain their crypt. Because conditions are arid in Guanajuato, many of the dead in their crypts had mummified. The mortuary/ ossorium with the mummified remains became notorious. When Amalia refers to turning her home into a mortuary, she is making a direct reference to the Guanajuato mortuary / ossorium where the mummified people were housed. The final scene in which the camera rises up on the dolly to reveal many other bodies is a direct visual reference to Guanajuato's mummies.

Pride: In a world of rigid social hierarchy, identity is tied to one's place in the social order. Pride is the feeling that one has when there is a destabilization of one's sense of identity and it becomes necessary to defend one's existential, ontological place in the world. How does that happen? The phenomenological manifestations can take shape in the form of prideful encounters (spicy repartee, energetic fencing, appointments at dawn (deadly duels), and mistaken identities).

Women's role in Patriarchal World: Life for Amalia seems, on the surface, to be that of privilege, which would assure her a life of comfort, beauty, and syncretic approbation. Once she was born female, Amalia's main “job” was to prepare herself to be able to attract a husband of high social status, who is also possesses sufficient wherewithal to take care of her and the expected requisite offspring. Amalia must bring fertility to the bargaining table; but in Bugambilia, the fertility is implied; beauty is the universally acknowledged proxy for fertility.

Social Inequality: Although Ricardo leaves Guanajuato and finds another mine and becomes wealthy, even achieving the respected and admired status of charro, he is not accepted as a suitor by Amalia's father, who has chosen the young, easily led Luis Felipe to be her husband. The reasons are ostensibly because of social class and the notion that once you're born into a certain class, you stay there. However, there is also a more insidious side of class exclusions and exclusivity, and that has to do with the ultimately incestuous nature of class and hierarchy. The monarchies were notoriously inbred, particularly in the case of the Spanish – so much so that the classic Spanish method of pronouncing

consonants actually had its origin in the “Hapsburg jaw,” a congenital deformity that made it difficult for the tongue, palate and other parts of the mouth to place them in proper positions for certain sounds. Don Fernando is controlling of every aspect of Amalia’s life, and any attempt she makes to break free will mean that she will escape his powerful influence. There are many suggestions of incest in the film; not so overt as to offend the public, but certainly clear enough to suggest the psychological torment. The interiority of the spaces and the close looks and gazes, the absent mother (making Amalia the proxy), and the heightened state of anxiety and tension (heightened by Dolores del Rio’s frenetic overacting and attempts to look a “girlish” 41 (her actual age when filming the movie).

CHARACTER STUDY

Amalia de los Robles: The daughter of the owner of the richest mine in Guanajuato, notorious for doing everything he can to maximize his earnings, even if it means sacrificing lives to the dangerous conditions in the mines he owns. She is young, beautiful, and devoted to her father, but deeply conflicted when she falls in love with a lowly, but ambitious and hardworking supervisor in her father’s mine. She is also the mirror image of her long-dead mother, resulting in a twisted obsession of her father, who imagines his wife lives on through Amalia.

Beautiful: Amalia is beautiful and wears ornate gowns of frothy, light-colored materials. She wears the latest styles from Paris in her gowns and hats. Aware of her own beauty, she uses it to captivate and charm all the men in her retinue. Her father, widowed, is obsessed with Amalia’s beauty and her overall appearance because she is the exact likeness of her mother. Thus, the obsession that Don Fernando has for Amalia is not simply that of a father who wants to protect his daughter. He hangs on to his dead wife through Amalia, which makes the love a bit morbid as well as incestuous.

Privileged: Amalia belongs to the elites of Guanajuato, which seems would be a desirable social status to have. However, the privileges that Amalia is able to enjoy are quite limited. Her father’s position in the community as the owner of the richest mine in the area make him also one of the most powerful. Amalia’s father’s wealth does not provide her with any freedom or the ability to embark on intellectual, cultural, or geographical adventures. Instead, she is completely constrained by her father’s orders for her. Her privilege does manifest in the form of creature comforts and a gorgeous wardrobe.

Dominated by father: To say that Amalia is dominated by her father is a bit of an understatement. She is the object of his obsession with his late wife, her mother, and the fact that he sees his dead wife in her and wants to keep Amalia with him in order to maintain a sense of connection to his late wife is extremely oppressive to her. His obsession with the past is depicted through the staging, where he is shown in ornate, dark rooms that harken to the past. Whenever the subject of Amalia’s potential marriage (and thus, separation and loss for the father) comes up, Don Fernando erupts in rage and suggests that death would be preferable.

Archetypal: Amalia is the archetypal princess who is an object of adoration and fascination, as well as privilege. Her lovely wardrobe, her bedroom and dressing chambers, together with her bathing in rose petals followed by piano salon evenings with members of the Guanajuato elite make her the quintessential princess. However, like many archetypes, they convey a deeper existential truth, and the same princess who is adored is literally loved to death; she is the object of obsession and that kind of obsessive love, by both her father and her betrothed, severely restrict her options in life. She is psychologically constricted and constrained; in essence, buried alive. So, when her father murders her betrothed and then commits suicide, instead of freedom, Amalia echoes their behavior. She becomes a prisoner of obsession, and creates her own entombment. The archetypal princess is beautiful, but never free, and absolutely never has self-determination. In Freudian and Lacanian terms, she is a projection of the male need to possess, and she exists because desire quickly transcends the body and moves to the realm of unattainable fantasy.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. Amalia lives a sheltered and privileged life in Guanajuato. Describe two different scenes which illustrate her status and role in her family and in the community.
2. Describe Don Fernando de los Robles and his view of social hierarchy. Describe two scenes that demonstrate his view of miners, the families of miners, and others who work for him.
3. Select three scenes that make visual and/or verbal reference to being buried alive or being buried after death. What are the indications that suggest that the references are metaphorical as well as literal.
.
4. Identify at least one scene that visually evokes the notion of a mausoleum or crypt, and where the faces and bodies of the dead could be nearby. What is the impact of the scenes?
5. Describe the self-fashioning, self-actualization of Ricardo. How does he transform himself from a lowly supervisor to a respected and admired charro, and also the owner of his own mining operation?
6. Explain how Lacan's notions of desire and fantasy make this film not only about star-crossed lovers, but also about the close relationship of desire and fantasy, love and death.
7. For Roland Barthes, pleasure (Plaisir) occurs when one reads a text (or watches a film) and comprehends the rising action. Joy (jouissance), however, occurs when there is a rupture in the narrative, and there are suddenly more possibilities of interpretation, and the "rupture" between denotation and the figurative can be perceived. Please select a scene in Bugambilia where it is clear that there are metaphorical possibilities as well as literal.