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The “Brutal Mirror” in Spanish and Mexican Cinema

When we discuss the tropic of the brutal mirror in Spanish cinema, by no means does it exemplify the Freudian notion, of a humanoid that invokes a sense of unfamiliar. If anything, this essay will exemplify the brutally honest mirror of a particular minority group, women in the decade of 60s Spanish Cinema and present day, the impact political and cultural, with hints of artistic decoration. We begin to wipe the mirror free from what American Cinema in the 1940-70s, characterized its post war genre of film making, Europe saw the rise in neorealism, this movement dependent on the level of devastation the country suffered during the war, dictated their movement. Focused on the everyday lives of ordinary people, with realistic, gritty and sometimes controversial themes. We will be discussing not only the stark contrast in this particular film, “Viridiana” (Buñuel, 1961). As well as the notable divergence significantly from the “Hollywood Style”, reflecting the unique historical and cultural context of Spain and how that paved the way for Spanish directors, and their use of the female lead, in a masculine controlled narrative.

The “Franco Regime”. A period marked by excruciating censorship and unwavering conservative values. “Viridiana” (Buñuel, 1961), subtly but powerfully critiqued the repressive narrative of the regime of enforcers as well as poking the bear in the face of the Catholic Church. *Buñuel*, born in 1900 Spain, moved to Paris during his early 20s, where he became deeply involved in the Surrealist movement,

collaborating with artist to like *Salvador Dali*. His first film, "Un Chien Andalou" (*Buñuel*, 1929), co-created with Dali, showcased his ambition for surreal imagery and marked a milestone in "Avant-Garde" cinema, "Also called experimental film. It focuses on an artistic practice of visual abilities and cinema. It's far from major box office hits, usually has a low budget. Also, avant-garde films seem very different either without a plot or narrative, mainly used to show off the artistic capabilities of the film industry. Being different from the normal movie style, experimental films never got a huge viewership or sizeable public showings", (Cronin, 2014). He hit the ground flying following his first with, "L'Age d'Or" (*Buñuel*, 1930). Where he garnered the disdain of the Catholic Church and bourgeois society that will follow him later in his career. In the early 1930s, he returned to Spain to continue his momentum and worked in various roles in the film industry, though his career was interrupted by the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) He fled his country due to his leftist political views. Fleeing to the United States and Mexico, he spent sometime working in the Museum of Modern Art in New York and in Hollywood, but found very little success in the American film industry, mainly due to this disdain for mass commercialism. He realized that moving to Mexico, where he revived his directing career and became a key figure in Mexican Cinema. He produced some of the critically acclaimed films including, "Los Olvidados", (*Buñuel*, 1950), a groundbreaking film portraying the lives of impoverished children in Mexico City. This film essentially won him international acclaim and marked his return to prominence as a director, while still holding the essence of his purpose of uniquely blending surrealism, social critique and innovative story telling. His journey through Spain, France, the United States, and Mexico shaped his diverse and influential body of work, ultimately leading him to "Viridiana", (Cronin, 2014).

"Viridiana" was part of the broader trend of Spanish films exploring social realism. This was a bold move in a country where cinema was often used as a tool for propaganda. The film's depiction of rural Spain, its people, and their struggles reflected the reality of life under Franco's rule, which was often glossed over in mainstream Spanish media of the time. "Viridiana" was banned in Spain almost

immediately after its release. The Franco regime condemned it for its portrayal of Spanish society and its irreverent treatment of religious themes. The film was also denounced by the Vatican, particularly through its publication 'L'Osservatore Romano', which criticized its perceived blasphemy and moral degeneracy. Despite, or perhaps because of, its controversial nature, "Viridiana" won the Palme d'Or at the 1961 Cannes Film Festival. This was a significant achievement and a testament to its artistic merit. The film's success at Cannes was a turning point in international cinema, as it brought global attention to the quality and depth of Spanish filmmaking, and also to the repressive conditions under which artists like Buñuel had to operate. With its complex interplay, of all themes deemed hidden, the "Brutal Mirror" makes it a poignant example of the powerful films are, as a medium for social and political commentary.

After Luis Buñuel and his groundbreaking work with films like "Viridiana," Spanish cinema and filmmakers, including those in the Spanish-speaking world, have continued to evolve, often drawing inspiration from Buñuel's themes and styles. Directors like Guillermo del Toro and films like "Roma" (Cuarón, 2018), "The Shape of Water" (Guillermo del Toro, 2017), are part of this rich lineage, reflecting and expanding upon various tropes and themes that have become characteristic of Spanish and Spanish-language films (Toro, 2017). Buñuel's influence extends even into today's era of Modern Spanish – Language Cinema. Through the featured complex female characters, a trend that has been embraced and expanded upon by contemporary filmmakers. Films like "Volver" (Almodóvar, 2006), and "Roma" (Cuarón, 2018). Placed women at the center of their narratives, exploring their lives, struggles, and resilience in deeply patriarchal societies. The theme of brutality, often juxtaposed with innocence, is a recurring motif in Spanish and Latin American cinema. This can be seen as a reflection of the turbulent history and social realities of these societies. "Pan's Labyrinth" (Guillermo del Toro, 2006) is a prime example, combining the innocence of a young girl with the brutality of post-Civil War Spain, creating a haunting narrative that blends fantasy and harsh reality. Familial relationships, often complex and

fraught with tension, are a common theme. This focus can be traced back to the influence of Buñuel, who frequently explored the dynamics of family life. Films, known for their vibrant storytelling and complex characters, frequently explore themes of family, identity, and memory. “*Todo Sobre Mi Madre*” (Almodóvar, 1999) is a notable example as well as “*Roma*”, (Cuarón, 2018). Set in the 1970s in Mexico City, not only tells a personal story but also portrays the political and social upheavals of the time. It is evident that the legacy of Luis Buñuel has paved the way for whom have continued to contribute to the diverse tapestry that is Spanish language film. (Evans, 2019)

The contrast between contemporary mainstream American cinema and the burgeoning era of Spanish-language films presents a fascinating study, particularly evident in places like Los Angeles, where the significant and growing Hispanic and Spanish-speaking population is influencing cinematic trends and preferences. This demographic evolution opens up unique opportunities for new filmmakers, particularly those who seek to innovate and diversify storytelling by tapping into this evolving market. Emerging directors have the opportunity to capitalize on this trend by creating films that deeply resonate with this audience, through authentic language use, rich cultural themes, and nuanced representation. A wealth of untapped stories and themes within Hispanic communities awaits exploration in cinema, offering a fertile ground for original storytelling. (Wood, 2021) Thus, I am committed to contributing to a more diverse and vibrant cinematic landscape, recognizing this as not just an opportunity, but as my personal mission.

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