

# FEMALE MONSTROSITY AND FRANCO'S DICTATORSHIP: THE CATHOLIC SPINSTER IN *UNA VELA PARA EL DIABLO*<sup>1</sup>

## *MONSTRUOSIDAD FEMENINA Y FRANQUISMO: LA SOLTERONA CATÓLICA EN UNA VELA PARA EL DIABLO*

ERIKA TIBURCIO MORENO

Universidad Carlos III/Universidad Complutense de Madrid

### **Resumen:**

Este artículo analiza *Una vela para el diablo*, producida por Eugenio Martín y estrenada en 1973. El objetivo es relacionar históricamente el monstruo femenino con los conflictos en torno a la modernización a partir de los años sesenta. La película revela una serie de conflictos inherentes a los últimos años de la dictadura franquista, especialmente aquellos en torno a la represión y la liberación sexual, así como la respuesta de un gobierno que se negaba a aceptar los cambios.

**Palabras clave:** Nacional Catolicismo, terror español, franquismo, liberación sexual, soltería monstruosa

### **Abstract:**

This article analyses the film *Una vela para el diablo*, produced by Eugenio Martín and released in 1973. The aim is to relate the film's female monster to the conflicts around modernization that started in Spain in the 1960s. It shows the persistent conflicts that permeated the last years of Franco's dictatorship, especially those surrounding repression and sexual liberation, as well as the reactionary response of a government that refused to accept the social changes.

**Keywords:** National Catholicism, Spanish horror, Francoism, sexual liberation, monstrous spinsterhood and monstrosity

## **1. INTRODUCTION: NATIONAL CATHOLICISM, PATRIARCHY AND MODERNISATION DURING THE FRANCOIST DICTATORSHIP**

The Franco dictatorship lasted from 1939 to 1975 and stemmed from a civil war (1936-1939) between Franco's faction and the legitimate government (the Second

---

1 Universidad Complutense de Madrid. Correo-e: erika.tiburcio.moreno@gmail.com. Recibido: 01-05-2021. Aceptado: 10-09-2021.

Republic). As the supreme authority, Francisco Franco distributed power among his varied conservative supporters, namely the Carlists, Falangists, army, and Monarchists. Ideologically, although some fascist elements pervaded the political discourse of the first period, it was predominantly rooted in National-Catholicism. The victory of the traditional elites and power holders over the political challenges presented by republicanism, the working class, regional nationalism, and other emancipatory and democratizing movements, such as feminism (Rodríguez Barreira, 2018: 97). National Catholicism established the identification of the “true Spaniard” with two main ideas. First, Spain was conceived of as the traditionalist nation that prohibited peripheral regionalisms in favour of the Castilian and unifying ideal. Second, ultraconservative Catholicism became the other essential facet of a good patriot, transforming the Church into one of the cornerstones of Franco’s dictatorship.

From a gender perspective, the societal separation of men and women corresponded to a patriarchal conception of the sexes, where men were meant to be brave, active, virile breadwinners and present in the public space while females were meant to be submissive, devout Christians, good mothers and wives, and therefore restricted to domesticity. Not only did the distinction between masculine and feminine conceptions pervade the private sphere, but social practices were also regulated following the male-controlled order. Schools were segregated, laws promoted female dependence on her husband (e.g., Catholic marriage, abolition of the divorce, and the criminalization of adultery), and some institutions were aimed at enforcing the assigned feminine role (Female Section of Falange, the Patronato de Protección a la Mujer). According to Rosario Ruiz Franco (2008), the Catholic doctrine “endorsed the differentiated role of society, thus favoring the maintenance of the patriarchal family structure”<sup>2</sup> (156).

Regarding submission, Aurora Morcillo Gómez (2015) adds that women’s bodies were associated with the nation and became instruments of discipline by limiting them to chastity and motherhood (62). Any expression of dissent against the ideas that female “reds” represented could be punished. This group, referring to either feminine members of the defeated faction or simply relatives of male republicans, illustrated the exemplary corrections taken for betraying Francoist Spain and their inherent feminine nature alike. Consequently, women had to sacrifice their desires and aspire to be virtuous and remain virgins until they got married to comply with the gender order.

Although the dictatorship replaced autarky with economic liberalization in the 1960s, the patriarchal discourse was present after Franco’s death. From an economic perspective, Spain showed an incipient capitalist and consumerist society whose income per capita rose from \$1,042 in 1960 to \$1,904 at the end of the decade. The consumer society was effectively established in 1971: more families owned televisions

---

2 Translated by the author. Original text: “avalaba el papel diferenciado de la sociedad, favoreciendo con ello el mantenimiento de la estructura patriarcal familiar”.

(56%), fridges (66%), washing machines (52%), and Seat 600 cars (35%), which became the most iconic symbol of this prosperity (Moradiellos, 2000: 146-147).

The transformation of customs and the relaxation of attitudes along with the influence of foreign pop culture coexisted with the persistence of repression and outdated messages. As a result, youths searching for social transformation were confronted with “fierce conservative resistance both in the social body as in the state apparatus”<sup>3</sup> (Gracia García and Ruiz Carnicer, 2001). The progressive female liberation expanded this transformation because the new capitalist system required that women become part of workforce. The law of Political, Professional and Labour Rights of Women in 1961 exemplified the governmental control of this new role. The law was aimed at promoting females in the workplace in a wide range of professions (with some exceptions such as the army). The increasing number of female workers and students at secondary and tertiary levels alike blurred the boundaries between the masculine public and the feminine domestic spheres.

Along with the new economic conception of women, mass tourism and advertising helped spread liberal ideas. On the one hand, the liberal attitudes of European vacationers, often wearing their scandalous bikinis, contrasted with the national devotion to feminine purity. On the other hand, mass media empowered women by focusing on their pleasure and their own needs. As Carmen Romo Parra notes (2005), women’s destinies expanded to include both their role as producer-consumers and their responsibility for domestic duties (101).

Cinema was likewise adapted to these social transformations. From the outset, the official censorship focused on subversion and immorality, encouraging productions centred on National Catholic values like *Raza* (José Luis Sáenz de Heredia, 1942) instead. Despite the persistence of censorship, film was renovated through the law of New Rules for the Development of Films (1963). Additionally, the co-productions also permitted filmmaker to innovate and integrate in the 1960s and 1970s international trends.

## 2. SPANISH HORROR AS A HISTORICAL SOURCE

Spanish horror experienced a boom between 1968 and 1976 after two successful productions, *La Residencia* (Narciso Ibáñez Serrador, 1969) and *La noche de Walpurgis* (León Klimovski, 1971) (Pulido, 2012: 38). This genre converged with international trends thanks to co-production and the rise in productions<sup>4</sup> (Lázaro-Reboll, 2012: 11). Indeed, censorship propelled the creation of a “Hispanic” aesthetic based on imaginary and international places set in recognizable Spanish locations, with foreign and native actors and actresses in those stories (Aguilar, 1999: 24).

3 Original text: “fuertes resistencias de carácter conservador tanto en el cuerpo social como en el aparato del estado”.

4 150 titles, comprising 30% of the national production, between 1968 and 1976.

Aesthetically, horror comprises a set of violent stories that grotesquely exhibited obscene footage and included a wide range of titles. *Fantaterror* titles like *La marca del hombre lobo* (Enrique Eguiluz, 1968), *La noche del terror ciego* (Armando de Ossorio, 1972), and *No profanar el sueño de los muertos* (Jorge Grau, 1974) mixed fantasy monsters and graphic violence. Other titles such as *El bosque del lobo* (Pedro Olea, 1970) and *¿Quién puede matar a un niño?* (Narciso Ibáñez Serrador, 1976) linked horror to social criticism. Critics' consideration of these films as tasteless, despite their popularity, has led to an academic disregard for their place in film history. Nevertheless, the inclusion of popular films broadens the social and film panorama because of "its reliance on a knowledge of the national history by its target audience" (Dyer and Vincendeau, 1992: 9). Indeed, Spanish horror movies are another branch of exploitative European productions like Italian *Giallo* that shared the "their campy qualities –their formulaic plots, excessive sex and violence, political incorrectness, awful acting, poor dubbing, and date music and design" (Olney, 2013: 43).

Historically, the films' visceral style was shaped by the violent nature of Franco's dictatorship and "offered precisely the sort of "perceived" threat that Franco's regime rigidly guarded" (Schlegel, 2015: 26). Furthermore, the centrality of "other" as the enemy who threatened normalcy connected the prototypical horror formula with political discourse. While Franco legitimized the prosecution and imprisonment of the so-called insurgents (communists, republicans, feminists, etc.) in order to consolidate Catholicism, horror intermingled his repressive conservatism with other attributes opposed to the hegemonic urban values.

The function of the monster as a reminder of a traumatic past (Poole, 2011: 21) also connected with the anxiety surrounding the persistent violence of the 1970s. Despite the punishment of "reds" was attenuated from the 1950s, repression was adapted to social changes in the 1960s and 1970s (Rodríguez Barreira, 2018: 100). Indeed, social opposition and new challenges (the assassinations of Melitón Manzanas in 1968 or Luis Carrero Blanco in 1973 by the ETA, a Basque Independent Terrorist Group) brought about more repressive laws like the decree-law of banditry and terrorism (1968), which reinstated martial courts to try dissent and peaceful political actions, the declaration of several states of emergency (1969, 1970-1971, and 1975), and the persistence of executions to prevent the spread of democratic ideas. Thus, the destruction of subversion was replaced by contention and deterrence (Ysàs, 2004: 141).

Horror responded with a parade of cruel monsters like Alaric de Marnac (*El terror surge de la tumba*, Carlos Aured, 1972) or the blind templars (*La noche del terror ciego*), whose bloody crimes "can definitely be read as fictional negotiations of the cultural and ideological oppression of fascism and dictatorship" (Aldana Reyes, 2017: 200). These two medieval monsters, representing the clergy and the nobility, respectively, confronted historically and aesthetically with the "clean" modernity of the 1970s and "summon up a very recent past, threatening to return at a time when the Francoist state was disintegrating" (Lázaro-Reboll, 2012: 91) as well as symbolising the tougher repression on social dissent.

In essence, Spanish horror was a cultural product that reflected not only societal changes but also the confrontation between traditionalism and modernity. Aspects such as religion, sexuality, and urbanity pervaded horror stories, identifying both monstrosity and normalcy as representatives of such discourses. Additionally, the violent clashes between Franco and his supporters and detractors impregnated the specific nature of Spanish antagonists to create aberrant creatures whose threat crystallized in cruel and brutal murders.

### **3. THE FEMALE MONSTER IN SPANISH HORROR**

The Francoist justification of patriarchal hierarchy established male superiority, confining the feminine role to the domestic sphere. Thus, the National Catholic ideal of a devout patriotic wife and mother naturalized women as pure, non-sexual, and submissive. This conception, inherent to the totalitarian ideology of Francoism, was reinforced by scientific assumptions and religious scorn (Morcillo Gómez, 2015: 73). Horror films fueled, reiterated, and questioned this gender discourse through the female otherness. The transgression of women as aggressors/active confronted male domination by violating visual codes with feminine coercive control (Creed, 2007: 151).

The Spanish horror genre exploited female subversion from different angles. Sexuality and sexual deviation pervaded the vampire and the lesbian vampire as seen in the Countess Nadine Carody (Soledad Miranda) in *Las vampiras* (Jesús Franco, 1971), Mabelle de Lancré (Helga Liné) in *El espanto surge de la tumba*, and Mircalla Carstein (Alexandra Bastedo) in *La novia ensangrentada* (Vicente Aranda, 1972). These attractive women subverted the Catholic discourse of virginity and female virtue by transgressing heterosexuality through the seduction of victims or exertion of dominance over men. Since the foundation of the dictatorship, the Catholic association of virginity and female virtue aimed to preserve their bodies and subject their identity to others' judgment (Peinado Rodríguez, 2016: 283). As mentioned above, surveillance eroded dissent, and women were considered legal minors, which resulted in the rejection of their rights and desires.

Eventually, Spain's international opening combined with urban anonymity propelled the progressive emancipation of women and their presence in former masculine-only spaces like universities or places of leisure. Meanwhile, new clandestine feminist and women's associations like the Movimiento Democrático de las Mujeres (MDM, 1965) spread empowerment ideas and distributed censored books (*Obras Completas*, Simón de Beauvoir, edited by Aguilar in 1971) (Ruiz Franco, 2008: 162, 165). Additionally, the semi-legal distribution of the contraceptive pill from 1964, which prevented unwanted pregnancies, women experienced unprecedented freedom over their own bodies. The patriarchal reaction saw this transformation as an attack on the sacred values of family and marriage that would defeminize women by interfering with ovulation (Ignaziuk and Ortiz Gómez, 2019).

The fear of female pleasure and deviation as well as the destabilization of the gender order were represented in the relentless connection between vampirism and

sexual pleasure. Their mastery of seducing men and women lead to lusty and bloody encounters with their victims. As vampires with arrogant gestures and dominion over men incarnated the fear of feminism, binary oppositions played a key role (García Fernández and Cordero Domínguez, 2017: 49) in identifying feminine liberation with dangerous otherness. Male protagonists were presented as violent characters who turned to brutality to defend hegemonic normalcy (Pedraza, 2004: 312).

Other feminine monsters related to vice, sin, depravity, and satanic rituality were the countess Erzsébet Báthory (Lucía Bosé) in *Ceremonia Sangrienta* (Jorge Grau, 1973) or Elizabeth Bathory (María Silva) and her followers, the Coven of Witches (Elsa Zabala, Inés Morales), in *El retorno de Walpurgis* (Carlos Aured, 1973). These Satanic-like rituals offering virgin maids' blood to satisfy their needs created a double transgression. On the one hand, these women rejected their inherent portrayal as devout caregivers who sacrifice their desires to fulfil the male requirements of the national identity. On the other hand, female pleasure was derived from others' pain and blood by drinking and coating their bodies with vital fluid.

Similar to their male peers, these refined monsters perpetuated the unequal social hierarchy. The so-called *developmentalism* and the capitalist adaptation did not symbolize the disappearance of classism but the replacement of the prior economic elites with industrial and commercial ones (Moradiellos García, 2000). The same hierarchy operated in a discourse that relegated women to the role-model bourgeois Catholic angel in the house. The intrinsic link between power and monstrosity naturalized the association between the upper-class and female otherness. The Mistress of Tolnia (Helga Liné) in *La orgía nocturna de los vampiros* (León Klimovsky, 1973) exemplifies these associations given her authority in seducing victims and distributing corpses to their enslaved peasant ghouls.

Apart from the fantastic archetypes, all shared realism, familiar locations, and exhibited taboos (Lázaro-Reboll, 2012: 31). The gothic imagery relies on excessive transgression and the hostility of rural backwardness. These themes are particularly central in *Una vela para el diablo* (Eugenio Martín, 1973), whose national atmosphere combines the convergence between the brutal postwar and the carefree present to question the propagandist image of Spain. The incoherence of defending the Catholic morality, failing to fulfil the assigned role, and appropriation of moral guardians form the basis of female monstrosity in this paper.

#### **4. THE MONSTROUS FRANCOIST SPINSTER IN *UNA VELA PARA EL DIABLO***

*Una vela para el diablo* is about the murders committed by two sisters, Marta (Aurora Bautista) and Verónica (Esperanza Roy), who run a guest house called Las Dos Hermanas in an Andalusian town. Their gory actions start when May Barkley (Loreta Tovar), a British guest who is sunbathing topless, is killed by Marta who considers May a sinner. From then on, Marta justifies her crimes by attributing them to God's intentions. Despite her doubts about their actions, Verónica helps her sister commit murder. However, the new guest, Laura Barkley (Judy Geeson), starts to suspect the

sisters of killing the missing tourists. When they are uncovered, it is also revealed that the victims' corpses are ingredients in the meals the sisters serve in their restaurant.

According to Eugenio Martín, Catholic dogmatism pervaded the whole film story. In an interview, he stated that:

I did not conceive *Una vela para el Diablo* as a horror film but as an ambitious drama, denouncing fanaticism and its aftermath. Because all fanatics are potential murderers, who kill in peace of mind because their conscience is free. [...] We, Spaniards, can offer terrifying aspects [...] in open squares, when our religious fanaticism has caused tortures and burning of innocent victims, or when political fanaticism has caused their humiliation and executions. How many horror stories, real horror stories, remain hidden in the framework of our civil war?<sup>5</sup> (Aguilar and Haas, 2015: 105).

Realism impregnates this story through the setting: a touristy small town in Andalusia. This setting alluded to this growing tourist sector in the region, which reached 34.6 million visitors in 1973 (Pellejero Martínez, 2006: 31). Verism is also stressed through the sisters' demure dark clothes, the establishing shot of the white village in the opening credits, and the full shots of old inhabitants sleeping the *siesta* in the entrance hall while the camera captures Verónica going to her secret lover's house.

The rural atmosphere is also featured by a relentless tension between traditionality and modernity. Visually, foreign youths wearing shorts and jeans contrast with old-fashioned dresses that cover female native bodies. Musically, pop themes associated with foreigners are confronted with folklore musical tones that reinforce the anachronistic behavior of the rural women. The antagonism becomes relevant when Hellen Miller (Lone Fleming) arrives in town and has a bath in the fountain. The non-diegetic *bossanova* vocal theme accentuates her nonchalance, while the shots of villagers' reactions are intercut with the silent medium shot of Marta observing the scene from the window. After Hellen rushes into the guest house as her leitmotif musically invades the interior, the camera focuses on Marta's discomfort and helplessness at being unable to prevent her stay. Indeed, Marta's voice rises above the subdued music, but the view-from-behind shot of Marta from the doorway watching Hellen walk away reveals the futility of her attempt.

Indeed, surveillance and contempt trigger monstrosity and turn this idyllic vacation place into a sinister setting. Aurora Bautista's<sup>6</sup> choice as a religious fanatic killer (Higuera Flores, 2017) intensified the disturbing reality in *Una vela para el diablo*. Aesthetically, this movie connected with *feísmo*, found in other *fantaterror* and genre titles, based on grotesque, deadly, and fear images stemming from backwardness.

---

5 Translated by the author. Original quote: Yo concebí *Una vela para el diablo* no como una película de terror sino como un drama de cierta ambición, que denunciara el fanatismo y sus secuelas. Porque todo fanático es un asesino en potencia, que asesina con tranquilidad debido a que su conciencia está libre. [...] Los españoles podemos ofrecer aspectos terroríficos [...] en las plazas abiertas, cuando nuestro fanatismo religioso ha torturado y quemado a sus víctimas, o cuando el fanatismo político las ha humillado y fusilado. ¿Cuántas historias de horror, de auténtico horror, permanecen ocultas en el marco de nuestra guerra civil?

6 Aurora Bautista (Marta) had been the protagonist of propagandist Francoist movies like *Agustina de Aragón* (Juan de Orduña, 1960), aimed at spreading Francoist value and official propaganda.

Dreary images of disturbing peasants performing occult practices and forbidden acts highlight the grotesque “as a form of artistic expression in contemporary Spain has served as a powerful conduit for social critique” (Schlegel, 2015: 25). *Una vela para el diablo* binds animal and human corpses with the inner act of eating. The first close-up of the sisters beating and cutting lamb meat in the kitchen is replicated in another scene around minute 54, in which a close-up shot of dead goat heads on the kitchen table. Two minutes later, those same heads are shown accompanied by the sisters cooking Hellen’s corpse.



Illustration 1. Marta and Verónica in the kitchen

Indeed, otherness emerges from transgressing social rules, which reveals terror as a dreadful consequence of the context. Unlike horror, terror is a deviation of reality that underlines its historical condition “not because the objects of fear are so changeable, but because images of them are” (Twitchell, 1985: 20). In this case, victims’ proximity to aggression stems from the surveillant atmosphere in rural Spain, symbolised by the villagers’ gaze and:

The portrait of a hell under the sun, dominated by aged and mournful faces that look with curiosity, desire, contempt and hatred at the young women who walk their enviable bodies on the cobblestones of the old Spain<sup>7</sup> (Sala, 2010: 333).

Regarding the first scene, monstrosity emerges from their dialogue and the fluctuation between economic growth from business and danger of deviating from the righteous path. While smashing garlic, Marta says: “I’m not interested in making no money if we had the devil living on this”<sup>8</sup>. Safeguarding decency and Catholicism from outside sinners trigger a set of killings by the two apparently harmless spinsters almost indistinguishable from each other and the surrounding space, whose greyish tones and lamb meat highlight the secondary female role.

This oppressive atmosphere built upon female virtue is explored through radical actions on female nudity and liberal attitudes. In the first murder, the outbreak

7 Original quote: “El retrato de un infierno bajo el sol, dominado por rostros aventajados y enlutados que miran con curiosidad, deseo, desprecio y odio a las jóvenes que pasean sus cuerpos envidiables por los adoquines de la vieja España”.

8 The dialogue is taken from the English dubbing of the movie.



of violence arises from teenage boys shouting at the topless tourist sunbathing on the rooftop. When the owners find the semi naked girl, a close up from Marta's leg and the woman sunbathing topless looking up at her while she is blamed for the scandal is surrounded by Spanish rhythms. After covering her, she is expelled while they argue. Female punishment and surveillance are also represented in the parallel editing sequence that shows Hellen riding a horse in the village streets while Marta and Verónica judge her. Thus, the dialogue insists on the defence of decency:

M: Verónica, look! Scandalising the whole village. Doesn't it seem strange to you, Verónica? That a woman like that is taking a room in our house.

V: What are you thinking about, Marta?

M: About what happened to that shameless hassle. You know, it wasn't an accident. She deserved it.

V: That girl deserved...?

M: The worst.

V: Marta, you shouldn't speak as if you knew the will of our Lord. God has mercy for all his creatures.

M: Not, for all of them Verónica. Not for all of them.

Historically, decency was inextricably linked with two requirements that women had to fulfill: honour and reputation ("honor y honra" in Spanish). The former implied social acceptance and the latter denoted individual reputation and group perception. The patriarchal oppression turned these concepts into conditions to pursue through chastity (Aliaj, 2013: 116). In the case of women, the discovery of premarital sex spurred public scorn and social exclusion.

*Una vela para el diablo* delves into social coercion through the sisters' persistent self-demand to publicly comply with social mandates that arise from their shameful spinsterhood. This status resulted in a social stigma based on their inability to acquire full citizenship through marriage and motherhood (Morcillo Gómez, 2015: 105). Indeed, the tension behind female singlehood is shown in the scene when the mayor (Fernando Hilbeck) explains to Laura, who suspects the sisters of killing missing tourists, that they are inoffensive despite being frustrated with not having the same freedom as the younger tourists.

Thus, concealment becomes a key instrument to escape from social surveillance and restrained desire as well as the origin of monstrosity. Regarding sexual impulses, both sisters had to struggle against the temptation of flesh multiple times. Regarding Verónica, she must deal with the guilt over her secret affair with Luis (Carlos Piñeiro), a young boy who is working for them. In one scene, Verónica enters her brightly lit house and shows the boy's naked body. Then, the corporeal becomes the center of the relationship through two close-ups of Verónica kissing his naked body and, later, undressing secretly while Luis embraces her from behind and takes her to bed. The scene continues with the two in bed kissing followed by a close up of Verónica staring, admitting her concern about her sister's reaction in case of being discovered.

In Marta's case, the same sexually repressed impulse is linked to violence as shown in two scenes. In the first one, Marta is staring at Luis and other male children

naked in the lake from behind a bush. A suspenseful theme and close-ups of her arousal and leaving while her legs and her clothes are tearing emphasizes the release of her impulses. According to Rubén Higuera,

The event, reminiscent of the self-flagellations that monks inflicted on their bodies to purge their sins and indecent thoughts, the character's arousal, indicating a repressed sexuality (with masochistic tendencies) struggling to emerge. In the feature film, Marta's nudity is inextricably linked to the violence inflicted on her own body or that of other characters<sup>9</sup> (Higuera Flores, 2017).

While each sisters' approach differs, the requirement to hide internal desires emphasizes each women's responsibility to maintain their reputations. Indeed, both scenes conclude with a camera tracking of them walking around and checking that no one is watching them. Historically, the insecurity of public spaces and neighbours' surveillance perpetuates the patriarchal order, which relied on the power that ordinary citizens obtained through popular sanction. Consequently, Spanish women had to refrain from arousing suspicion as the scenes demonstrate. Additionally, their pre-eminence in monitoring other women's misbehaviour help perpetuate the system as well as divert attention to other ones.

Thus, the transgression of the loss of female virginity before marriage caused the social condemnation of that woman, whose reputation would be tarnished all her life (Román Ruiz, 2020: 141). In the movie, respectability also extends to Marta and Veronica's house and guests. The house is divided into an accessible portion open to the public (the dining room, guest bedrooms, and the hall) and a restricted area (the kitchen and the wine cellar). Similarly, the division of physical spheres reproduced the duality of these women who abide by rules publicly but who also have dark, violent impulses lurking underneath the surface. Consequently, the above-mentioned private territories incarnate their deepest desire for revenge, illustrated by preparing corpses for meals in the kitchen, which had been maintained in the huge wine jar in the basement.

Catholicism impregnates the whole public portion of the home, where the restaurant and hall are, which is highlighted in different scenes. In the first part, the stairs with quatrefoils, which Marta and Verónica follow when they hear voices, lead them to a narrow corridor crowned by an ogival arch, where sculptures of the Virgin Mary and saints as well as different crosses are displayed. Then, a high-angle shot from the top of another staircase reveals a Virgin Mary stained-glass window. In another scene, Marta is lighting candles while praying in front of a huge painting of Jesus Christ sending demons to hell. Indeed, low key lighting focuses on demons in hell, which symbolises Marta's justification of the murders as the defense of purity as well as her assumption as a moral guardian who assumes the surveillant role.

---

9 Original quote: El suceso, que remite a las autoflagelaciones que los monjes infligían a su cuerpo para purgar sus pecados y pensamientos indecentes, termina acrecentando la excitación del personaje, indicando una sexualidad reprimida (con tendencias masoquistas) que lucha por emerger. En el largometraje, la desnudez de Marta va indisolublemente ligada a la violencia ejercida sobre su propio cuerpo o el de otros personajes.

This role leads Marta to punish tourists who are staying in her house and transgressing decency by exposing their bodies without concern and releasing their sexual desires. This infiltration into their territory is seen as an immoral danger that justifies violence and murder. The most illustrating instance is evident when May falls on a religious stained glass after being pushed by Marta. One broken pane shows an image of the Virgin Mary with a sword that symbolizes the fight against the Devil mitigates Marta's culpability and strengthens her image as the protector of Catholic morality and her purity alike. Thus, violence is legitimised in order to defend morality, whose malignance is stressed by increasing the volume of an organ theme while she proclaims, referring to the victim: "she killed herself. She had been punished by God. We were his under justice".



Illustration 2 and 3. Broken glass from the first murder in *Una vela para el diablo* and *Alegoría de Franco y la Cruzada* (Arturo Reque Meruvia, 1948-1949)

Historically, Franco's dictatorship also justified violence in the name of preserving Spain from danger, while resulting in 50.000 deaths (Casanova and Gil Andrés, 2014: 219). The Catholic Church was crucial to exculpate the crimes committed by the Rebels in the Civil War and in the dictatorship, as illustrated by the pastoral issued by the bishop Enrique Pla y Deniel, titled *The Two Cities* (1936)<sup>10</sup>. In *Una vela para el diablo*, Marta encapsulates this incongruent discourse by exposing sadism and self-indulgence through Catholic sanction (De Febo, 2002: 134).

The violent Catholic bigotry also characterizes the decisiveness of Marta and Verónica in the mother's killing. Norma (Blanca Estrada) stays in the house with her child, who captures all the female villagers' attention. After being informed by Beatriz (Montserrat Julió) about her theoretical status as a single mother, the sisters' positive attitude turns into a growing hostility. Indeed, an over-the-shoulder shot of the sisters looking through the window at Norma walking while discussing how they had been deceived because she is not married highlights this point. As a result, when Norma returns home, her humiliating murder and her deprivation of rights are upheld to defend the Catholic morality. Cinematically, the reverse angle shot of Marta and Norma places the former in a superior position through a slight low angle when she speaks, while a high angle reaction shot of Norma reflects her feeling of helplessness. Meanwhile, Verónica is holding the baby behind Marta, supporting her

10 Following *City of God* by Augustine of Hippo, the bishop Enrique Pla y Deniel wrote *The Two Cities* to justify the military coup against the Second Republic in 1936. According to him, the rebel faction represented the divine while the Republican one symbolized the opposite.

sister's authority. The silence and the pre-eminence of the reprimand reinforce the dehumanization of Norma:

M: It wasn't difficult to have this child, was it? No! Of course, it was. Any bitch can do it. The important thing comes afterwards. When you have to make sacrifices for the child.

N: What do you know about it to talk like that?

M: I know enough. That you are not married and that you have deceived us all. If you abandon him now, to walk the street at night, what would you do when he is little older?

N: Listen! Don't try to tell me what I should or should be doing! And get out of my way! What do you think you're doing?

M: Don't touch him! Your child!

V: If he was ours, we could give him a good home. Security is what he needs.

M: What are on the earth you talking about?

N: A child needs good examples to follow, and you couldn't even give him a father.

The violent punishment of this supposedly single mother connects with the structural oppression of female sexuality, illustrated in the Patronage for the Protection of Women<sup>11</sup>. Although consensual sexual relations were not penalized in the 1960s and 1970s, women were victims of an unfair system: article 132 of the Civil Code<sup>12</sup> blames women for sexual impurity. Indeed, the author states that "any consensual sexual relationship that could be maintained outside of marriage tarnished a woman's reputation for life if the man did not agree to marry her"<sup>13</sup> (Morcillo Gómez, 2015: 34).

Thus, Marta and Verónica's attempts to safeguard morality through violence exposes the hypocritical dictatorship. Indeed, this false piety stands out from the very moment Marta and Verónica try to hide the corpse they are cooking when Norma appears in the kitchen. Additionally, after realizing that Norma was actually married, Marta insists on the divine intention of their crimes. The perverted cycle is also stressed in two film sequences. Firstly, Pascal's statement in the opening quotes, "there are two kinds of men: the righteous, who think they are sinners; and the sinners, who think they are righteous", announcing the main feature of the monsters.

Secondly, before the film's climax, Marta, after slapping Verónica, who has just collapsed because of guilt, replies to her sister: "my conscience was never more clear [...] if this was an act of evil, they'll find out; if it was an act for God justice, we'd never been discovered". While she pronounces these words, she is empowered by a faint suspense theme and the imperceptible low-angle shot with her sister's inferior position on the floor, who is petrified by guilt and fear. This powerful image contrasts

11 Established in 1941, it was aimed at reeducate prostitutes or young women who did not obey Catholic morality and were confined in its centers.

12 The Civil Code was enacted in 1889 and applied in Franco's dictatorship. Article 132 was not reformed and quoted: no lawsuit that directly or indirectly aims at investigating the paternity of illegitimate children who do not meet the legal condition of natural children shall be admitted in court. Original quote: no se admitirá en juicio demanda alguna que, directa ni indirectamente, tenga por objeto investigar la paternidad de los hijos ilegítimos en quienes no concurra la condición legal de naturales.

13 Original quote: toda relación sexual consentida que pudiera mantenerse fuera del matrimonio manchaba de por vida la reputación de una mujer si el hombre no aceptaba casarse con ella.

with the final over-the-shoulder shot of the villagers, in front of the sisters' house, witnessing them about to murder Laura. The high-angle shot enlarges the window to show their shock when they realize that their true nature is discovered.

The hypocrisy that pervades the untamed aggression also recalls the traumatic past of the Spanish Civil War and the postwar era. Antonio Lázaro-Reboll, referring to the blind templars saga, affirms that the sisters "act as a reminder of the forces which created and maintained an authoritarian regime based on terror and death" (Lázaro-Reboll, 2012: 92). In *Una vela para el diablo* these outdated monstresses incarnate the repressive violence in the name of God and their pretension of being good Catholics. This pretense of virtue is also stressed in their false friendship with Beatriz, who always informs them about villagers' gossip. However, Marta and Verónica do not hesitate to serve them human meat and unconsciously force them to cannibalize. The most striking instance can be found in the question that Marta asks Beatriz about the meal while Beatriz and her husband are eating human and the subsequent gossip about tourists' immorality.

Unconscious cannibalism and the dehumanization of victims symbolize the distorted discourse of virtue by Francoism and its privileged supporters. The perverted process stems from gossiping, which accelerates murders, and ends in eliminating evidence by feeding victims to their customers. The Catholic rite by Marta to save her soul and legitimate her cruel killings also related to the prominent role of the Church legitimising Francoist crimes because of the combination of religion, fatherhood, and Franco, as well as the privileges that Franco granted (Casanova and Gil de Andrés, 2014: 281). In the scene where Verónica is crying because of the first murder, Marta replies that they are right because "years ago that shameless girl will be burnt alive in the public square". Apart from burning witches in the previous centuries, public executions occurred in the postwar years, executions that were supported by elites who benefitted from the Franco regime. These elites viewed themselves as the defenders of Catholicism and fatherland, all while contradicting the sixth Christian Commandment, "thou shalt not kill".

Nevertheless, not only does the sisters' otherness originate in crimes and religious patriarchal oppression, but their status also contradicts the same hierarchy they defended. Firstly, female subordination is subverted by being economically independent thanks to their business. They run their guest house with their worker Luis (Carlos Piñero), who is also Verónica's secret lover. Visually, the patriarchal order is defied through Marta's orders and her gaze at Luis after commanding him to carry the tray to one of the guests' rooms. At the end of this long shot, Marta smiles through the camera, emphasizing that this action manifested her desire to disturb Verónica. Thus, Marta's superior position and her sadist enjoyment disputes females' natural inclination to obey.

Otherness also stems from the sisters' marital status, which placed women like Marta and Verónica in an inferior position automatically, as the Spanish pejorative adjective "solterona" exemplified. Catholic femalehood was denied to them because

they could not contribute to national ideals with their natural tendency towards motherhood and marriage.

From the very beginning, the State was interested in the model of Catholic woman promoted by the Spanish Church, since it legitimized the subjugation of women, while the moral discourse that the Spanish Catholic Church maintained with respect to women had a more ambitious and transcendent objective: by exercising an iron control over women, it guaranteed the anchoring of the family in moral principles, achieving, in the last instance, social control<sup>14</sup> (Peinado Rodríguez, 2016: 287).

The transgression of the social order is also shown through their private desires related to sexuality (Verónica's secret affair and Marta's hidden voyeurism of naked boys in the lake) that needed to be hidden. Nevertheless, the centrality of concealment collapses when foreigners are not punished for releasing their own desires, which force old villagers to accept them due to the economic and social changes in the 1960s. Thus, brutal aggressions against young tourists who are staying in their territory reflects the contradiction of a persistent backward mindset and new lifestyles represented by youth culture.

Consequently, the sisters could not fulfil societal requirements because of their internal conflicts between their adaptation to the gender discourse and their individual needs. Firstly, purity and virtue are transgressed (by the sisters when they are unseen). Secondly, Marta's aspiration to be the executing arm of the Virgin Mary defies the superior male position as well as the special role attributed to historical characters like Isabella, the Catholic Queen<sup>15</sup>, or the Holy Saint Teresa of Jesus<sup>16</sup>. The imagery around Saint Teresa of Jesus also extended its role as a talisman and became "a multifaceted function: endorsement of the regime, model-guide for women, consolidation of Franco's charisma" (De Febo, 2002: 38). Thus, the mythical military discourse that exalted Franco as the supreme leader would reinforce the bond between on masculinity and active violence. Consequently, Marta's comparison to the dictator's religious mission attacks the very nature of aggressive masculinity and submissive femininity.

Apart from that, the constant reference to anachronism by confronting generations (old villagers, including Marta and Verónica, versus young tourists), clothes (old-fashioned ones versus provocative shorts and tight shirts), and mindsets (youth happiness and lack of concern versus obsession about gossip) intermingled

---

14 Original quote: Al Estado le interesó desde el primer momento el modelo de mujer católica que promovía la Iglesia española, pues legitimaba el sometimiento de la misma, mientras que el discurso moral que la Iglesia Católica española mantuvo con respecto a las mujeres tuvo un objetivo más ambicioso y trascendente: ejerciendo un férreo control sobre la mujer, se garantiza el encardinamiento de la familia en los principios morales consiguiendo, en última instancia, el control social.

15 Queen Isabella of Castile (1451-1501) ruled Spain with Ferdinand of Aragon. For francoists, these couple united the nation under one kingdom and, especially Isabella, represented the victory over muslims and the end of the Reconquest (a historiographical term that refers to the struggle between muslims and Christians in the Iberian peninsula).

16 According to Francoist mythology, the relic of this Catholic saint was kept by Franco after having been founding in 1937. He always wore it and it was believed to have helped him defeat the Republican faction.

with modernity and tourists' absence of religious sentiments. In the movie, the museum that Laura visits connects the religious icons with the past, turning them into cultural commodities that illustrate Spanish history. Thus, the eruption of growing secularism in this traditional village leads neighbors to adapt to the new lifestyle in order to survive. The distance between past and present is symbolised in the scene when all the villagers and authorities witness the pre-murder moment from the street. Marta's haughty gesture and Veronica's frightened gesture are amplified. The loud organ music and the presence of a barred window that separates them from the rest of the town confronts the sisters with their own evilness and otherness. Thus, the relic and religious legitimation of violence cannot function in the modern world rooted in rationalization and freedom.

*Una vela para el diablo* is unquestionably a representation of the Francoist female monster who needed to conform to their submissive role but transgressed the social and cultural imposition of subordination. This story, set in a typical Andalusian village where two seemingly harmless spinsters sisters unleash macabre crimes and commit dreadful sins. Social anxieties about women's liberation and the conflict between National Catholicism and modernity alike are explored through these monsters, particularly Marta. Finally, this horror movie encapsulates the decay of the regime, which had to face the growing social contestation, and personified the violent reaction that the government exerted on dissident elements.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The historical transformation of the 1960s and 1970s brought about increasing social contestation by groups who fought against the authoritarian dictatorship. Additionally, the new conception of females progressively liberated women from their submissive roles, ushering in a new period of feminist struggles that continue in the present day. Horror cinema encapsulated these changes and constructed monstrosity according to the patriarchal hierarchy. Thus, the female and the male monstrosity responded to different attributes that placed them outside normal societal boundaries. In particular, female monsters were sexually active, dominant, and challenged female subordination.

*Una vela para el diablo* set a landmark in Spanish horror cinema by breaking with the conventions of *fantaterror* and locating monstrosity in two fanatic spinsters who kill tourists in the name of Catholic morality. The depiction of the two Spains, traditional and modern, is pointed out by including visual differences (tourists and locals dress differently) and distinct views about behaviour. As the foreigners arrive in the town, gossip allows locals to monitor visitors in the territory. The fanaticism of Marta and Verónica and the consensus in the town about the lack of virtue and purity of the tourists turn all of them into either murderers or accomplices by committing unconscious cannibalism. In its historical parallel, Franco exerted a totalitarian dominion thanks to citizen cooperation, who helped to punish and repress dissent.

The female monster represented the reactionary response of the conservative sectors of society and the use of brutality, which Marta and Verónica considered necessary, highlighting the very contradiction of Catholicism and brutal Francoist repression. The violent reaction by Marta and Verónica, as representative of traditionalism, represented the governmental suppression of the groups that rose against the authoritarian policies and claimed for democracy. Verónica and Marta's otherness also relies on their spinsterhood, which contravenes the natural female inclination to marriage according to National Catholicism. Their economic independence and sexual impulses confronted the aspirations of femininity, namely marriage and motherhood.

Finally, *Una vela para el diablo*, like other Spanish horror titles, is an excellent source to study the social and cultural transformation that took place. From a gender point of view, the arrival of modernity triggered profound changes of what it meant to be a woman. The female monster in Spanish horror used to represent male anxieties about the female liberation in Eugenio Martín's work focused on the figure of the subaltern spinster to criticize the danger of fanaticism and show gender oppression. Not only did Marta and Verónica symbolize the patriarchal contempt towards transgression but the former also questioned the Francoist model of women by attributing herself to be the armed force of the Virgin Mary.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- AA.DD. ([1995] 2017): *Historia del cine español*, Madrid, Cátedra.
- Aguilar, C. (1999): "Introducción. Fantasía española: negra sangre caliente", en C. Aguilar (coord.) (1999) *Cine fantástico y de terror español, 1900-1983*, Donostia. Donostia Kultura, Semana de Cine Fantástico y de Terror: 11-69.
- Aguilar, C. and Haas, A. (2015): *Eugenio Martín. Un autor para todos los géneros*, Bilbao, Quaternmass.
- Aldana Reyes, X. (2017): *Spanish Gothic. National Identity, Collaboration and Cultural Adaptation*, London, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Aliaj, O. (2013): "Perspectivas del honor y la honra aplicadas a la mujer española en la época de Franco" <https://revistas.ucr.ac.cr/index.php/rlm/article/view/13818> (Consultado el 15 de febrero de 2021).
- Casanova, J. and De Gil Andrés, C. (2014): *Twentieth-Century Spain*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Creed, B. ([1993] 2007): *The Monstrous-Feminine. Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Nueva York, Routledge.
- De Febo, G. (2002): *Ritos de guerra y de victoria en la España Franquista*, Bilbao, Desclée de Brouwer.
- Dyer, R. and Vincendeau, G. (1992): "Introduction", en R. Dyer and G. Vincendeau (eds.) (1992) *Popular European Cinema*, Londres, Routledge: 1-14.
- García Fernández, E. C. and Cordero Domínguez, A. (2017): "Sangre y sexo en el cine de terror español (1960-1975)" <https://revistas.uma.es/index.php/fotocinema/article/view/3496/3199> (Consultado el 20 de abril de 2021).



- Gracia García, J. and Ruiz Carnicer, M. A. (2001): *La España de Franco (1939-1975). Cultura y vida cotidiana*, Madrid, Síntesis <https://cutt.ly/lEdR1hm> (consultado el 20 de septiembre de 2021).
- Higueras Flores, R. (2017): “La visión inhóspita de España en el cine de terror nacional: el caso de *Una vela para el diablo* (Eugenio Martín, 1973)”, en A. del Rey Reguillo (ed.) *Viajes de cine. El relato del turismo en el cine hispánico*, Valencia, Tirant Lo Blanc: 205-222. <https://eprints.ucm.es/id/eprint/44054/1/Visi%C3%B3n%20inh%C3%B3spita.pdf> (Consultado el 30 de diciembre de 2020).
- Ignaciuk, A. and Ortiz Gómez, T. (2019): *Anticoncepción, mujeres y género. La ‘píldora’ en España y Polonia*, Madrid, Catarata <https://cutt.ly/pEjN0lY> (consultado el 16 de abril de 2021).
- Lázaro-Reboll, A. (2012): *Spanish Horror Film*, Edimburgo, Edinburgh University Press.
- Moradiellos García, E. (2000): *La España de Franco (1939-1975). Política y sociedad*, Madrid, Síntesis.
- Morcillo Gómez, A. (2015): *En cuerpo y alma: ser mujer en tiempos de Franco*, Madrid, Siglo XXI.
- Olney, I. (2013): *Euro horror: Classic European horror cinema in Contemporary American culture*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.
- Pedraza, P. (2004): *Espectra. Descenso a las criptas de la literatura y el cine*, Madrid, Valdemar.
- Peinado Rodríguez, M. (2016): ““Las mujercitas” del franquismo: cómo enseñar y aprender un modelo de feminidad (1936-1960)” [http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S0104-026X2016000100281&lng=es&tlng=es](http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0104-026X2016000100281&lng=es&tlng=es) (Consultado el 18 de febrero de 2021).
- Pellejero Martínez, C. (2006): “Estadísticas históricas sobre el turismo en Andalucía. Siglo XX” <https://www.juntadeandalucia.es/institutodeestadisticaycartografia/historicas/turismo/ehiturismo.pdf> (Consultado en 20 de marzo de 2021).
- Poole, S. C. (2011): “Introduction: The Bloody Chords of Memory”, en W. S. Poole (2011) *Monsters in America: Our Historical Obsession with the Hideous and the Haunting*, Waco, Baylor University Press: 1-26.
- Pulido, J. (2012): *La década de oro del cine español, 1967-1976*, Madrid, T&B Editores.
- Rodríguez Barreiro, O. (2018): “The Franco Dictatorship, 1939-1975”, en A. Shubert and J. Álvarez Junco (eds.) (2018) *The History of Modern Spain. Chronologies, Themes, Individuals*, Londres and Nueva York, Bloomsbury: 97-112.
- Román Ruiz, G. (2020): “«Custodios de la moral». Control socio-moral y sanción popular en el mundo rural altoandaluz tras la posguerra” [https://rua.ua.es/dspace/bitstream/10045/107530/1/Pasado-y-Memoria\\_21\\_05.pdf](https://rua.ua.es/dspace/bitstream/10045/107530/1/Pasado-y-Memoria_21_05.pdf) (Consultado el 22 de febrero de 2021).
- Romo Parra, C. (2005): “El desorden de la identidad persistente. Cambio social y estatus de la mujer en la España desarrollista” <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=2469503> (Consultado el 15 de marzo de 2021).
- Ruiz Franco, R. (2008): “Mujer y sociedad durante el franquismo”, en R.M. Capel (dir.) (2008) *Cien años trabajando por la igualdad*, Madrid, Instituto de la Mujer: 151-166.

- Sala, A. (2010): “¿Cine gótico español? Un viaje a las mazmorras del subdesarrollo y otros infiernos”, en Antonio J. Navarro (ed.) (2010) *Pesadillas en la oscuridad. El cine de terror gótico*, Madrid, Valdemar: 319-350.
- Schlegel, N. G. (2015): *Sex, Sadism, Spain and Cinema. The Spanish Horror Film*, Londres, Rowman & Littlefield.
- Twitchell, J. B. (1985): *Dreadful Pleasures. An Anatomy of Modern Horror*, Nueva York, Oxford University Press.
- Ysàs, P. (2004): *Disidencia y subversión. La lucha del régimen franquista por su supervivencia, 1960-1975*, Barcelona, Crítica.