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LA DEVORADORA: THE MEXICAN FEMME FATALE

Madness, for Buñuel, lies always in characters whose surroundings and ideals are based on beliefs and traditional morality.

Max Lautenegge and Mario Gerteis

The figure of the femme fatale recurs in numerous mythological, literary, and cinematic traditions. Although the particular representation of this powerful female archetype changes in response to historical and psychic mechanisms, the symbolic function of the femme fatale as a threat to male authority remains constant. Specifically, her perceived control over life (through procreation) and death (through symbolic castration) challenges the stability of patriarchal ideology in classical narrative texts. In order to contain this threat, the femme fatale must be destroyed or made powerless.

In this chapter, I examine the Mexican version of the femme fatale in two films: *Doña Bárbara* (Fernando de Fuentes, 1943) and *Susana* (Luis Buñuel, 1950). Doña Bárbara's threat emerges in the form of a denial and a repression of female sexuality, whereas the femme fatale in *Susana* poses other kinds of dangers through her flaunting of femininity.

As a motif defined foremost by sexual difference and sexual excess, the femme fatale in Hollywood mainstream cinema disrupted narrative and representational continuity by her excessive sexuality. She was most visible in the postwar film noir cinema as the "black widow" who entrapped unsuspecting men in her deadly web of deceit. While woman in the classical Hollywood cinema was often positioned as the object of the male hero's goals, in film noir, the femme fatale surfaces

as a more conflicted and threatening character, "the dark lady, the spider woman, the evil seductress," in the words of Janey Place (1980, 35).

Mexican cinema produced its own negative female figure, the mala mujer, a reincarnation of the archetypal Terrible Mother that Herrera-Sobek discusses. In early "seduced and abandoned" films like *Santa*, and in the later cabaretera films, such as *Salón México* and *Distinto amanecer*, women may be forced into prostitution due to economic misfortunes, but they remain essentially "good women." However, in other films, such as *La mujer del puerto* (Arcady Boytler, 1933), *Crepúsculo* (Julio Bracho, 1944), *La mujer sin alma* (Fernando de Fuentes, 1943), and *La devoradora* (Fernando de Fuentes, 1946), the female-gone-bad characters are represented as "cruel and vengeful vampires, without sexual scruples, usurping the cruelty of men, enslaving, beautiful, and unfeeling"—la devoradora, the "devouring woman" (Ayala Blanco, 1968, 145). This evil figure, by her very visibility and, at the same time, inscrutability, challenged the fragile coherence of many classical Mexican film narratives.

Mary Ann Doane, in her study of the recurrence of the femme fatale in various traditions and guises, argues that this symbol of the threatening woman materializes as an articulation of male fear about female sexuality. The male protagonist regains control through his desire for her. According to Doane, the femme fatale therefore can be considered only a conduit of male power rather than a source of power in her own right. Although Doane does concede that the femme fatale "is not totally under the control of its producers," she ignores specific challenges posed by this sign of excessive and dangerous femininity. To suggest, as Doane does, that the femme fatale's power "is usually not subject to her will" and that she "is not the subject of power but its *carrier*," is to deny the real threat that the femme fatale poses to male subjectivity and to narrative coherence (1991, 2).

I would argue, instead, that the very identification of femininity as threatening and the unremitting compulsion to contain such expressions of female power in narrative and in social practice attest to the pervasive force of such power. My interest in this chapter will be to look at moments in the above two films where female power, wielded by la devoradora, emerges (in different ways) to threaten patriarchal ideology in the classical Mexican cinema.

While neither *Susana* nor *Doña Bárbara* is a progressive film in terms

of the portrayal of women, they do attest to the way in which expressions of female desire in melodramas may expose and disrupt patriarchal holds on narrative and social representation.

Doña Bárbara

Doña Bárbara, based on a novel by the Venezuelan writer Rómulo Gallegos, stars María Félix as a wronged woman who has discarded the visage of femininity and assumed the privileges of the male. A powerful and wealthy woman who controls hundreds of acres of prime ranch land, numerous head of cattle and horses, and the lives of the men and women who live on her land, Doña Bárbara dresses in men's clothing, takes on the aggressive and paternalistic manners reserved for the Mexican male, and evens rides astride her horse like a man. Because she punishes those who betray her with emotional and physical abuse, and occasionally with death, she is known as "Doña Bárbara, the terrible."[1]

Doña Bárbara opens with a short prologue that distances the story, both spatially and temporally, from 1940s Mexico. Two men sit in the bow of a canoe: a well-dressed young lawyer, Santos Luzardo (Julián Soler), returning to his family home in the outer regions of Venezuela after completing his university studies, and an older man who is guiding the boat up the Orinoco River. To pass the time, the older man relates the story of an earlier journey taken by a young woman who came up this same river "once upon a time." By setting *Doña Bárbara* "in a place and time far from Mexico," the narrative attempts to displace issues of sexuality, class conflicts, and gender relations from Mexican history.[2]

According to the older man, six "brutal men," the captain, and a beautiful young woman made up the crew of a small sailboat traveling up and down the Orinoco River, carrying cargo from port to port. When another man boarded the boat and fell in love with the girl, the jealous crew members killed him and raped the girl. Years later, a woman, Doña Bárbara, appeared on the river in another boat with "rancor in her heart," evil men at her side, and wealth and witchcraft in her trunks. It was the girl, now grown, returning to exact revenge.

From a close-up of Doña Bárbara, the film dissolves forward in time to a shot of a drunken man, Laurencito (Andrés Soler), who turns out to be an old friend of Santos Luzardo and a former lover of Doña Bár-

Figure 5.1. Doña Bárbara (María Félix) is la devoradora, Mexican cinema's femme fatale. *Doña Bárbara,* production still.

bara's. In a reversal of the usual "seduced and abandoned" stories, Doña Bárbara gave birth to Laurencito's daughter, Marisela, and left the child to be raised by her father. Disgraced and emasculated in the eyes of the local people, Laurencito became an alcoholic, leaving Marisela to grow up on her own, befriended only by Doña Bárbara's half-witted servant. Doña Bárbara thus fulfills the function of the classical femme fatale in this film through her symbolic castration of the father and her abandonment of motherhood. The goal of the narrative is to reinstate the father's potency and power by destroying the efficacy of la devoradora. In addition to reclaiming the land Doña Bárbara has stolen from his family, Santos Luzardo, the film's hero, will need to reclaim the father's power and restore the categories of sexual difference that Doña Bárbara has inverted.

Due to the ambiguity of Doña Bárbara's sexual identity, she is caught in a narrative tangle of contradictions. She consistently refuses the sexual attentions of men because the risk of becoming an object of male desire jeopardizes her self-constructed identity of not-woman. At the same time, she is subject to the ridicule of these men for denying her femaleness and for being neither man nor woman. When she finally discovers in Santos Luzardo a man she desires, patriarchy, which privileges heterosexual relationships, requires that she must first become a woman. However, she cannot accomplish this without giving up those attributes of power which characterize her masculinity, and when she tries out her female identity on Santos Luzardo, she is cruelly rebuked. Ultimately, she must deny her female identity in order to retain her position of authority.

Awaiting Santos Luzardo's arrival to discuss business matters, Doña Bárbara, standing before a mirror, removes her neck scarf, opens the collar of her shirt, lets her hair fall around her shoulders, and admires the image of the woman reflected at her. It is, however, the only desiring response she will receive. When Santos Luzardo experiences her seduction, he refuses to acknowledge her self-constructed female sexuality.

Confronted by this refusal, Doña Bárbara reassumes her masquerade, and when Santos Luzardo presents her with economic and moral ultimatums, she refuses to relinquish her power. Confounded by these contradictions of sexual difference, she resorts to witchcraft to seduce

Figure 5.2. Santos Luzardo (Julián Soler) has returned to his father's home to reclaim his land and the mantle of the patriarch. *Doña Bárbara*, production still.

him. She builds an altar to him, surrounding his framed picture with stars, crosses, and candles. By inverting the picture, she attempts to exert her power over him symbolically. If his power is determined by his maleness, then this inversion in part connotes an antithesis of maleness—or femaleness—in the oppositional structure of the narrative. However, she soon finds that her witchcraft does not work; it is overpowered by the force of an "authentic" masculinity.

Doña Bárbara is ultimately a story about the realignment of the family. The task proves to be a difficult one because, in this film, a family first has to be invented. The parental figures are not really parents in the proper sense: Laurencito trades his daughter for whiskey, and Doña Bárbara has never acknowledged her biological relationship to Marisela. It is Santos Luzardo who finally succeeds in reaffirming the sanctity of the family and the lawful status of the male by assuming the position of the father after Laurencito dies. And, refusing to be

tempted by Doña Bárbara's seductive power or by her witchcraft, he annihilates la devoradora.

The daughter, Marisela, through her marriage to the benevolent father figure Santos Luzardo, will complete the construction of the new family by assuming the position of the "good mother." However, this consummation is not accomplished without a struggle. Marisela enters her mother's house, looking for Santos Luzardo. Not finding him there, she proceeds to explore the rooms, searching, perhaps, for evidence of the woman who gave her life but about whom she knows nothing. Marisela spies the altar Doña Bárbara has constructed, and as she moves closer to inspect it, she is startled by the voice of Doña Bárbara asking her what she is looking for. From a close-up of the surprised face of Marisela, the film cuts to a medium shot of her mother leaning against the wall next to a mirror in which Marisela's image is reflected. At this point, the actual figure of the mother dominates the reflected image of the daughter.

"What do you want?" Doña Bárbara repeats.

"The photograph," Marisela answers in a close-up.

Doña Bárbara, asserting her control as a mother, walks toward Marisela in the wider shot. Marisela is again contained in the mirror's frame. "The man belongs to me," Doña Bárbara declares with finality.

The next two-shot finally places the two women on equal terms as Marisela screams *"Bruja!"* (witch) and lunges at her mother. The ensuing fight is broken up by Santos Luzardo. From a two-shot of the women, the film cuts to a medium shot of the man as Marisela crosses into the frame to place herself beside him. The subsequent shot reveals Doña Bárbara standing alone, facing the social and ideological sanctity of the heterosexual couple. Marisela, as a woman, now affirms her authority as Mexican discourse prescribed she could, through her displacement of the maternal figure and her inevitable alignment with the male father.

After Santos Luzardo and Marisela leave, Doña Bárbara hears a voice coming from her empty chair. The voice asks her what she wants, what she is looking for. Turning to her altar, she again inverts Santos Luzardo's picture, then immediately turns it right side up. She understands that her power has been canceled and her desire rejected by its object. Crying, she sits in the chair. "What's happened to me?" she

Figure 5.3. Doña Bárbara and her daughter, Marisela (Maria Elena Marqués), whom she has never acknowledged. In this scene, Marisela will move out from under her mother's power to align herself with the "father," Santos Luzardo. *Doña Bárbara*, production still.

asks. "I can't find myself." Neither woman nor man, she has no identity according to Mexican patriarchal ideology, which recognizes subjects first of all according to sexual difference. In the context of the narrative of the family melodrama, this could be read as a warning to Mexican women to retain their socially defined identity as women or suffer the consequences of nonidentity.

Susana

Susana (released in the United States as *The Devil and the Flesh* and in France as *Susana la perverse*), was based on a work by the Spanish playwright Rodolfo Usigli. Like many of Buñuel's films, it is sustained by the thinnest of plots. The film begins at the State Reformatory for Women during a severe thunderstorm. Susana (Rosita Quintana) is being dragged into an empty cell by three large guards.

In Virginia Higgenbotham's description of the initial incarceration scene, Higgenbotham identifies the guards as male. In fact, they are female, and this relation between Susana and her jailers introduces an important thematic point by establishing that the struggle for power is not limited to differences in gender, race, or economic class, but may occur within these divisions also. This theme is repeated throughout the film in struggles between members of the same class, between men, and between women.

Noticing a shadow in the shape of a cross on the dirt floor of her cell, Susana kneels in front of it and begs the "God of prisoners" to set her free. When a spider, one of Buñuel's recurrent motifs, creeps across the shadow, Susana jumps to the window and rattles the bars. To her surprise, the bars break loose and she climbs out into the storm. Though absurd moments such as these have earned classical Mexican cinema a reputation for being excessively melodramatic ("excessive" in this case being a disparaging label), in Buñuel's Mexican films, they function as a parodic critique of melodrama itself.

Taking refuge at the hacienda of wealthy Don Guadalupe (Fernando Soler) and his wife, Doña Carmen (Matilde Palou), Susana finds temporary freedom and the chance to secure a more permanent social position. Lying about how she came to be out in the storm, she presents herself as an innocent young girl fleeing from the family for whom she worked because the father attempted to rape her.

Recognizing that it is the mother of the household who will make the decision to let her stay, Susana sets about securing Doña Carmen's trust. Then, continuing to spin her web of deception, Susana seduces Don Guadalupe, his son Alberto (Luis López Somoza), and the hacienda foreman, Jesús (Victor Manuel Mendoza)—and betrays the trust and kindness of Doña Carmen, who has offered to be "like a mother" to her. The only character she cannot fool is the family's faithful servant, Perlita, a superstitious woman who believes that Susana is an incarnation of the Devil.

Although the character of Susana is the *object* of desire for the three male characters in the film, she is more importantly a *subject* who desires, and it is these desires that motivate her actions. However, unlike the men, for whom the woman functions as an object of erotic pleasure—apparently beautiful young women provide nothing else—Susana sees men as the means to achieve her goals of wealth, social status, and power.

Buñuel has said that *Susana* is one of his least favorite films, though he does regret "not pushing the caricature of the happy ending" (1983, 202). By the conclusion of the film, Susana has succeeded in seducing all three men and turning them against one another. Alberto has denounced his mother and father, Jesús has betrayed the trust of his employer, and Don Guadalupe has turned against his family, going so far as to order them away from the hacienda so that he may live there with Susana. However, at the last minute, the police arrive. Jesús, overcome with jealousy, has turned Susana in, and in a repetition of the opening scene, Susana is dragged off to be imprisoned in the reformatory once again.

The next morning, the weather clears, the family is reunited, and Carmen, Alberto, and Jesús return to their subservient and loyal positions as wife, son, and foreman, respectively. As the family emerges from the kitchen into the sunlit courtyard, Buñuel can't resist inserting a little surrealist joke: Don Guadalupe looks up to the heavens and says, "It was all just like a bad dream." The camera dollies back out of the courtyard, through the gates of the hacienda, and into the surrounding countryside, revealing, from the outside, a self-contained, walled-in society that does in fact exist in a dream world.

Despite this pseudohappy ending, *Susana* begins and ends with the spectacle of a woman struggling violently against containment. More-

Figure 5.4. Susana (Rosita Quintana) is restrained by the political arm of the law and the social arm of patriarchy. *Susana*, production still.

over, in both the opening and the closing scene, it is the legal arm of patriarchy that holds the woman in check. This image of struggle works as a metaphor for a latent but central theme of *Susana*: the confrontation between human desire and social repression, a conflict that emerges repeatedly in the films of Buñuel.

Susana is perhaps one of the most unknowable cinematic femmes fatales because her secret is never revealed; it is ultimately locked up with her in her cell. Marsha Kinder writes that the sacrifice of a primary character in a parodic text "opens a space for radical change, not necessarily within the diegesis but within the signifying system" (1990, 74). Susana's promiscuity and her sexual assertiveness constitute a direct challenge to social and moral order. Though she is ultimately frus-

trated in all of her pursuits by sexual and social repression, it is at the expense of the narrative coherence, which then can be upheld only through Buñuel's surreal ending.

The happy ending, no matter how arbitrarily arrived at, is of course a convention of classical film melodrama. However, Franco suggests that paradoxical endings, which have no logical relation to the preceding sequence of narrative events, can work to "highlight the arbitrary nature of all narrative," including social narrative (1989, 135). Buñuel denies us the conventional "pleasure" of the classical melodrama by exposing the arbitrary nature not only of narratives but also of tradition and social mores. And Aranda perceptively argues that Buñuel's ending "has made us see that if we put ourselves on the side of the lubricious Susana and against these good Christians, it is because the spirit of justice is awakened in us, because finally he makes us discover where the positive values, and the truth, lie" (1976, 152).

Buñuel, Surrealism, and Parodic Critique

Despite recent critiques of the "author," we cannot categorically exclude a consideration of authorial intervention in the case of Buñuel. According to Robin Wood, a director's personal psychology often determines the level of thematic content to a certain extent (he gives the example of Hitchcock's recurring theme of "man's desire to dominate woman") (1988, 21). Wood does not deny that mainstream films are circumscribed by ideological constructions, by narrative patterns and generic conventions, and by other existing "forms, structures and conventions." However, he argues that the intervention of certain directors (he names Arthur Penn, John Ford, and Alfred Hitchcock, among others) can transform and appropriate these conventions. Although films cannot be reduced to an individual's "signature [or] touches," recognizable authorial marks emerge through thematic and stylistic repetitions across a body of work (1988, 12).

Similarly, Michel Foucault suggests that "the author's name is not simply a subject or predicate which can be replaced by a pronoun. . . . [I]t assumes a classificatory function . . . exceeding the limits of the texts" (1975, 606–607). For example, in the case of *Susana*, the term "Buñuel" signifies surrealism, and thus all the symbols, images, and aes-

thetic and political discourses surrounding the notion of surrealism inevitably intrude on discussions of Buñuel's films, whether they were produced in Spain, France, or Mexico.

Buñuel's history and his reputation were formed around a series of contradictions. First, although Spanish-born, he created his work outside of his native country, in France and Mexico; second, although he was well known as a surrealist filmmaker, most of his films were produced within the context of national commercial industries; and finally, as Marsha Kinder notes, though Buñuel made few films in Spain, he singularly represents Spanish film in most histories of that national cinema. In fact, Kinder has commented that Buñuel's experience best represents "the whole paradigm" of the émigré artist who leaves home "to satisfy curiosity, fame, or hunger; to find a more stimulating artistic environment or better economic opportunity; to escape oblivion, censorship, harassment, political persecution, or death" (1993, 287).

Although never a Mexican citizen, Buñuel is perhaps the best-known "Mexican" filmmaker outside of Mexico. He was almost forgotten when he arrived in Mexico in the late 1940s, but his 1950 film *Los olvidados* (*The Forgotten Ones*) brought Buñuel back into the international spotlight.[3] A film about the plight of street children living in the urban sprawl of Mexico City in the 1940s, *Los olvidados* was looked upon as more a Buñuelian film than a Mexican one, even by later film critics.[4] In fact, few critics have situated *Los olvidados* in the realm of Mexican cinema even though it was influenced by Buñuel's firsthand reaction to the effects of poverty and repression on the Mexican poor, and it was made within the Mexican film industry.

Altogether, Buñuel made more than twenty films in Mexico, including melodramas, comedies, and dramatic adaptations. Despite this relatively large body of work, most discussions of Buñuel do not consider his Mexican films in the context of Mexican cinema.[5] As noted above, Kinder regards Buñuel as the "paradigmatic case of exile" and suggests that the "hybridity" of his status clearly "demonstrates that nationality is an ideological construct" (1993, 286–287). While acknowledging that many of Buñuel's Mexican films are concerned with the legacy of colonialism, Kinder reads those films as products of "an exiled artist" and traces a "cultural continuity" across his Mexican and Spanish films, and a dialectical connection between these films and the ones he made in

France in the 1930s and then later in the 1960s and 1970s (1993, 292). She offers no analysis of the possible connection between the films Buñuel made in Mexico and Mexican cinema.

However, I think it is possible to consider Buñuel's *Susana* as an intervention in the cinematic representation of woman and sexual identity within Mexican cinema. According to Aranda, although in *Susana* "the conventions and vocabulary of the melodrama are respected," this respect does not "preclude a Surrealist vocabulary as well" (1976, 151–152). In Buñuel's Mexican films, the conventions of a national cinema are reworked to produce a critique of capitalism, patriarchy, the family, and the melodramatic mode itself through the use of surrealist and parodic strategies. Buñuel's exploitation of the femme fatale in films like *Susana* challenged traditional notions of female sexuality and the sacrosanct Mexican family. Within the economic and creative restraints inherent in working in a commercial film industry, Buñuel was able to produce some of his most powerful work. Using this opportunity to his advantage, he exposed the absurdities not only of social and sexual repression but also of cinematic melodrama. Aranda writes that Buñuel chose to work within the "popular language" of Mexican melodrama and rapidly "assimilated the national tradition of Mexican cinema" (1976, 144). In fact, Buñuel found the Mexican film melodrama to be a fertile domain in which to experiment with and subvert aesthetics and ideology.

He managed to introduce surrealistic images and tactics into many of his Mexican films. For instance, obscure references to animals and insects abound, dreamlike visions and experiences interrupt otherwise realistically rendered sequences, and normal human relations are suddenly inverted to reveal their constructed and arbitrary nature. In addition, melodramatic conventions are carried to extremes, gestures are heightened, and absurdities are exaggerated. All these tactics contribute to the subversion of melodramatic intent, which, according to D. N. Rodowick, seeks to find aesthetic solutions to ideological problems (1982, 41).

Buñuel's first Mexican film, *Gran casino* (1946), a musical starring the popular singer and actor Jorge Negrete and Argentina's Libertad Lamarque, was a failure at the box office. His second, a melodramatic comedy titled *El gran calavera* (1949), was a surprising box office success.

In 1949, Buñuel began working on *Los olvidados,* the film that rekindled his international prominence.

As in his earlier French surrealist films, Buñuel was always concerned with the political usefulness of his Mexican work. It was not enough that an audience reacted with pity to the myriad forms of human suffering; Buñuel wanted them to react with moral outrage.[6] Surrealism and parody were two strategies he employed to these ends. The purpose of surrealism, according to Buñuel, "was not to create a new literary, artistic, or even philosophical movement, but to explode the social order, to transform life itself" (1983, 107).

Founded by the writer André Breton and other French intellectuals, surrealism was an artistic and political movement that advocated the use of the dream state and other irrational states of mind to liberate human repression. On the one hand, believing that reality has multiple meanings, surrealists sought to create a language of artistic symbols. On the other hand, surrealism was also a political statement, a reaction against social repression characterized by conservative values of propriety and restraint. The expression of "forbidden" desires, such as eroticism and "mad passion" (*l'amour fou*), provided a means to state this opposition. The surrealists were revolutionaries of sorts, using humor, sex, and scandal as weapons to fight what they perceived to be the cultural, social, and political decadence of bourgeois society.

Although Buñuel has often been credited with introducing surrealism to Mexico in the 1940s, Breton had visited Mexico in 1938 and proclaimed it a "surrealist place *par excellence*" (Herrera, 1983, 226).[7] Hayden Herrera argues that the general Mexican audience was not "receptive" to surrealism because its members had their own forms of "magic and myths," and surrealism, for most Mexicans, represented a particularly European artistic movement. However, the work of Frida Kahlo and others attests to the fact that surrealism did have an impact on many Mexican artists, including some who had become disenchanted with the muralist movement, which privileged overt political themes over unconscious artistic impulses.[8]

Parody, unlike surrealism, is neither a genre nor a historical artistic movement. Moreover, it cannot be categorized as progressive or regressive in and of itself. According to the literary critic Joseph A. Dane, parody needs to be seen as a "form of criticism," a critical and purpose-

ful subversion of a classical narrative system. In film, parody functions similarly as a purposeful critique of melodrama.

Rather than looking for radical forms of narrative constructions, Kinder suggests that directors like Wim Wenders and Rainer Werner Fassbinder employ parodic techniques of exaggeration, repetition, and excess to undermine traditional melodramatic representations. She writes that these parodic strategies "use the same signifiers to generate new meanings, creating an opposition between two signifying systems" (1990, 74).

In *Susana,* and in his other Mexican films, Buñuel appropriated conventions of cinematic melodrama and parodic strategies, both well integrated into the understanding of Mexican audiences. That Buñuel's films were readily absorbed into the classical Mexican cinema attests, on one level, to the pervasiveness of parody in Mexican discourse and, on another level, to the capacity of parody to bind to the conventions of the classical Mexican cinema.

In Mexico, parody takes on a particular cultural form, *la vacilada,* defined by Anita Brenner as melodrama at its most grotesque. She describes la vacilada as a strategy of caricature that "reverses values" and as an "untranslatable word . . . a trance [that] has served as simile for a strain, a tone, an attitude that runs through Mexican life" (1929, 180). Mexican parody surfaces in literature, art, and cultural practice as, on one hand, a state of continual doubt and, on the other hand, an acceptance of anything. The Mexican Day of the Dead (*el día de los muertos*), on which families exchange human skulls made of sugar and breads in the shape of skeletons, and Guadalupe Posada's distorted illustrations of Mexican *corridos*—etchings of skulls, fiends, and perverted creatures in the guise of human beings—are examples of la vacilada. Posada's parodic work illustrates that in order to confront the inevitability of death, Mexicans meet it head-on with exaggeration, celebration, and laughter, as if to say "I challenge you, I am not afraid."

It is often hard to uncover subversive strategies in melodramatic texts that, though shrouded in a layer of realism, generally manifest a surplus of stylistic and narrative excesses. However, when emotional expressions are revealed to be contrived, manipulative, and ridiculous, instead of natural and logical, and when customary melodramatic identification with characters is subverted, melodrama becomes parodic.[9]

In his Mexican films, Buñuel does not reject melodrama for social realism or avant-garde techniques. Instead, he uses the primary elements of melodrama—the opposition of good and evil, heightened emotional and physical expression—but intensifies them to the extent that they become hyperobvious. Thus, in *Susana,* while the characters align with the conventional roles in Mexican melodrama, their actions and motivations are exaggerated, subjective processes of identification are frustrated, and no one emerges as a hero. The spectator is denied emotional identification with all characters.

In addition, many narrative sequences are connected by unexpected incidents instead of logical and linear narrative links. This magnification of an existing melodramatic extravagance functions in *Susana* as a parodic critique of the melodramatic polarities and conventions of the classical Mexican cinema, and of the conventions of the bourgeois Mexican family. Polarities are exposed, conventions are overturned, the father is willing to give up his wife for an immoral young woman he has known for only a few days, and the virtuous and sacrificing mother turns into a vengeful and sadistic monster.

The character of Susana embodies the melodramatic elements being parodied in Buñuel's film. One might ask how she can be a central character in the narrative and at the same time embrace parodic strategies. Kinder offers an explanation for this kind of uncertainty by arguing that individual characters in parodic texts are "ambivalent signifiers," in that their meanings alternate between distinct signifying systems (in *Susana*'s case, between melodrama and surrealism), "revealing both the continuity and distance between them" (1990, 74). On the one hand, Susana is an excessively visual character who functions as the classic femme fatale in the Mexican family melodrama. She is the woman who inserts herself into the nuclear family, violently disrupting its moral and social order, only to be ultimately contained in order to preserve the familial structure and achieve narrative closure.

On the other hand, Susana is also a figure whose psychological motivations cannot be associated with any identifiable individual history. Seemingly the central protagonist of the narrative, she does not experience the psychological transformations associated with primary characters. Instead, she functions as a highly charged, overdetermined symbol of a sexuality that operates outside the bounds of social accept-

ability. While she is figuratively destroyed, as the femme fatale usually is, her removal leaves numerous narrative contradictions unresolved, despite the film's "happy" ending: The family remains as dysfunctional as it was before Susana arrived; the workers on the hacienda still live in unequal and repressive relation to their masters; and women still occupy the same subordinate position in relation to men.

In *Susana,* the family is exposed as a ravaged convention, tottering on weak legs of paternal control and moral uncertainty. Whereas the traditional Mexican family was presided over by an all-powerful father and submissive mother, in this film the father is presented as impotent and ineffectual, while the mother is perversely aggressive. Even the mother/child relationship is attacked. Alberto's relation with Doña Carmen resembles that of an angry young child to his mother, full of deceit on the one hand and guilt on the other. Buñuel exposes the empty values of tradition, duty, and habit, and Susana's aggressive sexuality eventually exposes the facade of this family. In doing so, she disrupts the entire social system of the hacienda.

Higgenbotham, writing that the hacienda serves as a microcosm of the Mexican social order, in which "labor serves management in a rigid capitalistic hierarchy" and women serve men in a similar patriarchal hierarchy, concludes that Susana's aggressive sexuality eventually challenges the fragile structure of the Mexican upper classes. However, in Buñuel's film, it is not that female sexuality in itself is threatening, as Higgenbotham seems to presume. Rather, it is that the family is so fragile that almost any external force will destroy its illusory stability, which functions within a false paradise of domesticity.

Thomas Schatz recognized that the Hollywood family melodrama emerged at a moment in the 1950s when the American middle-class family, "the clearest representation of America's patriarchal and bourgeois social order," was responding to economic and social changes brought about by the effects of World War II (1981, 226). The role of women, both inside and outside the family unit, became a central focus of American ideology and the Hollywood cinema. Mexican cinema reflected a similar crisis regarding the representation of sexual difference, the family, and woman in the 1940s.

The position of woman in narratives of change and the narrative coherence of the family in Mexican films in the 1940s were strained by

the changing social status of the family in an era of booming industrialization, urbanization, and internal migration. The family thus came to represent an enigmatic and unstable structure in Mexican cinema. On the one hand, it was presented as necessary for maintenance of social order, while on the other hand, its instability also portrayed the disintegration of that order.

Franco, in her examination of Buñuel's *Los olvidados* (1950), notices that representations of fatherless families were occurring at a time when "the Mexican state [was] consolidating its paternal authority over its citizens" (1989, 154). While on the one hand, women had to continue to maintain the integrity of the family unit, on the other hand, if they were young, they had to be physically and emotionally strong enough to work outside the home, return at the end of the day to care for their family, and be a sexual partner for the husband or other male figure.

In an attempt to bolster a sense of coherence in a fragmented environment, postrevolutionary patriarchal discourses reemphasized the importance of familial relations, with the father as the head of the household and the state as head of the national family. The father's role was to assure his wife and children that the social, political, and moral promises of the Revolution were being fulfilled. However, as previously discussed, the failure of the state to provide real social and economic prosperity, combined with industrialization and the movement of large numbers of women out into the workforce, undermined this ideology. In films like *Susana* and *Doña Bárbara,* which removed the family from this ambivalent context and isolated it within the closed system of the hacienda, the weaknesses of the family, and thus of the national structure, which was dependent on the family's viability, were ultimately challenged, if not always destroyed.

The Desecrated Mother

In a number of Mexican films, la devoradora was pitted against the mother as a threat to the stability of the family. The figure of the mother was a central character in the classical Mexican film, usually portrayed as self-sacrificing, virtuous, and living only for the well-being of her family. Whereas the Hollywood maternal heroine of the 1930s

and 1940s, played by actresses like Barbara Stanwyck, Bette Davis, and Loretta Young, was generally young, pretty, somewhat independent, and subject to the same weaknesses as other human beings, the Mexican mother, as personified by the actress Sara García, was most often older, past her prime in beauty as well as age, entrenched in her submissive role demanded by Mexican patriarchy, and, above all, absolutely virtuous. The narrative task of this mother was to hold her family together in the face of external threats, be they economic, physical, or sexual.

In both *Susana* and *Doña Bárbara* the power of the mother is intensified by the absence of a strong father figure. Laurencito, in *Doña Bárbara,* is an ineffectual and impotent drunkard who cannot support his daughter either economically or emotionally. In *Susana,* Don Guadalupe's guns and horses are more important to him than his family and his home. He leaves the business of the hacienda to Jesús, and of the home and family to his wife, Carmen.

What feminist criticism refers to as the "problem of the sexual mother" is overcome in *Susana* by desexing Doña Carmen. When her husband, overcome with lust for Susana, momentarily displaces his desire onto his wife, grabbing her and kissing her passionately, Doña Carmen pushes him away and looks around to make sure no one is watching. It is the only moment in the film in which a sexual relationship between husband and wife is represented. Their matrimonial bed is a place for dissention, and the dinner table is the site of larger familial relations.

Doña Bárbara and Susana, conversely, are always portrayed as "something else besides a mother." Susana, as a sexually desirable woman (or not-mother), is seemingly available for sex at any time of the day or night, at any conceivable location—including the barn, Alberto's bedroom, Don Guadalupe's study, and even the bottom of an empty well. Doña Bárbara, in the guise of the male, cannot be a mother by virtue of her assumed male identity and of her refusal to take on the social and emotional responsibilities of motherhood. However, female characters like Doña Bárbara and Susana were not offered other alternatives in the Mexican cinema. Thus, by the conclusion of both films, these figures had to be symbolically if not physically destroyed, because there was no other place to locate them.

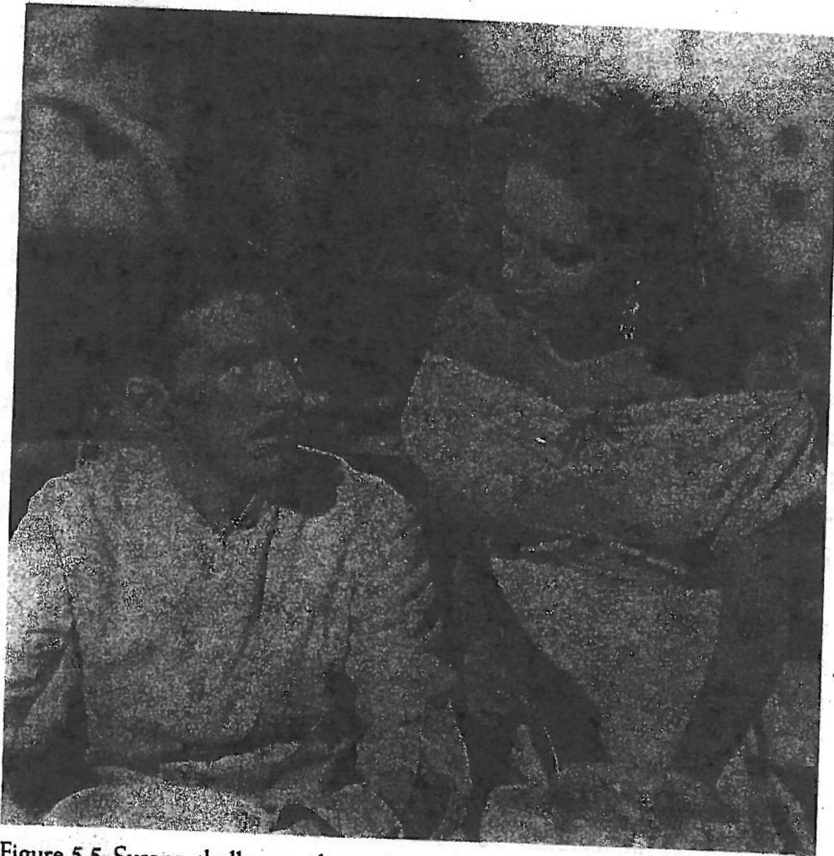

Figure 5.5. Susana challenges the traditional role of women in Mexico. At the same time, she is femininity incarnate. *Susana,* production still.

If Doña Bárbara and Susana are ultimately denied a place in the narratives of these films, the figure of the "good mother" also suffers. She is absent in *Doña Bárbara* until the end, when her possibility reemerges in the figure of the young Marisela. In *Susana,* her alleged respectability is revealed to be just a mask. When Susana provokes Doña Carmen, suggesting that Don Guadalupe will choose her because she is young and beautiful, Doña Carmen, urged on by Perlita, begins to beat Susana viciously. Cutting to a low-angle shot, from the point of view of Susana, the camera looks up into the face of Doña Carmen, who, with a sadistic smile on her face, is obviously enjoying herself. The whipping will do nothing to restore family order. Indeed, when Don Guadalupe

bursts in and grabs the whip from his wife, he assures Susana that she will not be the one forced to leave the hacienda. The whipping scene is the only time in the film where Doña Carmen is revealed to be capable of experiencing pleasure. The mother in *Susana,* though exposed as a sadistic and self-serving figure, is also a figure to be pitied.

La Devoradora: Femininity and Disguise

Both Susana and Doña Bárbara derive their limited and temporary power by means of disguise. While the notion of disguise has numerous connotations, in relation to sexual difference it involves an invocation of either masculinity or femininity. Joan Rivière, for example, alleges that a mask of femininity may be put on in order to "hide the possession of masculinity," (1966, 213). Doane, however, contests Rivière's analysis for suggesting that femininity does not exist and, if the masquerade is removed, nothing remains (1987, 34–37). Instead, Doane contends that a mask of femininity indicates the instability of the "feminine position" rather than its absence and that through disguise, women may actively select a site from which to stage their resistance by challenging the arbitrary assignment of sexual roles based on biological difference. According to Doane, then, masquerade, more than just a disguise, is an "acknowledgement that it is femininity itself which is constructed as a mask—as the decorative layer which conceals a non-identity" (1991, 25). Masquerade may thus be considered an intensification of gender and a "flaunting" of femininity.

Doane's hypothesis appears to destabilize the notion of masculine or feminine essence, while at the same time acknowledging the constructed nature of sexual difference. However, it still ignores the way in which a woman's appropriation of femininity as erotic spectacle may actually be an assertive act of power as well as a form of resistance. Through a strategy of masquerade, seduction becomes not merely a "weapon of the weak" but a vehicle whereby women may acquire access to patriarchal prerogatives.[10] As Doane reminds us, "the concepts of masculinity and femininity . . . have enormous socio-political implications and are linked to power" (1991, 38). This is why considerations of masquerade as a subversive gesture need to be examined in specific historical contexts.

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I am arguing that masquerade can be seen as contesting, rather than merely denying, the positioning of the objectified and fetishized female body as the one and only form of femininity. This junction of femininity, disguise, and social discourse is one of the sites where Buñuel's parodic strategies surface in *Susana*. In this film, the masquerade of femininity constitutes a resistance from within, in the form of a purposefully invented facade that works to undermine the conventions of patriarchal social and narrative representation.

Susana is never presented as anything but a series of self-constructed expressions of femininity responding to individual male desire. According to the narrative, she has no history, no family, no psychic baggage, no individual identity that can be explained. As each of her masquerades is peeled off there is another disguise underneath. The creature revealed at the end of the film is not even human, resembling instead a trapped animal lashing out at those who would contain it.

For the men who desire her, Susana purposefully embodies all of the various elements of desirability assigned to woman. Whenever she enters the presence of Don Guadalupe, she pulls her blouse down, exposing her shoulders and the tops of her breasts. At the same time, she pretends to be innocent of the sexual passion she evokes in a man whose physical relations with his wife are nonexistent. When she is with Alberto, Susana is the virginal flirt who deliberately attempts to arouse her lover's desire, only to frustrate it. For Jesús, the virile and aggressive macho, Susana is the experienced woman who understands the animalistic nature of his sexuality.

Whereas Susana assumes a feminine disguise, Doña Bárbara, conversely, masquerades as a man. Claire Johnston, in her analysis of masquerade in Tourneur's film *Anne of the Indies*, suggests that the need to assume a masculine disguise by the female protagonist "indicates the absence of the male . . . [and] serves as a phallic substitute." Johnston writes that rather than simply covering up her femaleness, Anne "usurps" the power of the father. Similarly, I find that Doña Bárbara, like Anne, "is not just acting out a 'masculinity,' . . . she constitutes an utter and irrevocable refusal of 'femininity'" (1990, 66–67).

The primary feature of masquerade is costume, which has long been both a form of disguise for women and a visible sign that identifies gender and social status (uniforms, designer labels, etc.). In Doña Bárbara's case, clothes, like a mask, hide the female subject, and thus female desirability and female desire. Her split skirt, riding boots, whip, neck scarf, and holstered guns allow her to "be" a male in order to have access to powers traditionally denied women.

In *Doña Bárbara*, sexual ambiguity confuses the issue of sexual difference, exposing and challenging its constructed distinction. In order to "be" a man, Doña Bárbara must deny female sexuality and any sign of femininity. However, in this film, masquerade ultimately functions only as a temporary guise. Ideological and narrative conventions require that by the end of the film, men and women assume their "rightful" positions as a heterosexual, monogamous couple presiding over the Mexican family. Lacking the parodic critique of *Susana*, the ending of *Doña Bárbara* can only reaffirm Mexican patriarchy.

The representations of Susana and Doña Bárbara offered disturbing challenges to prevailing notions of femininity, female sexuality, and motherhood in the classical Mexican cinema, but, like the Hollywood femme fatale, they are ultimately restrained. However, while the devouring female figure in *Doña Bárbara* is finally subdued through narrative resolution, Susana can be suppressed only through a parodic deconstruction of both the melodramatic narrative and the classical representation of Mexican woman after almost destroying the familial, economic, and narrative systems of the family and the classical Mexican cinema.

I noted how the figure of la devoradora was part of Mexico's mythical and literary heritage. It is a telling sign that at numerous historical moments in Mexico, this figure has reemerged. According to Herrera-Sobek, the inclusion of such powerful and threatening female figures in dominant Mexican narrative and representational systems symbolizes the "struggle of the rebellious individual seeking to restructure the social canon and rupture those codes that stifled her freedom." Such a representation epitomizes a patriarchal ideology that is so conflicted, it can never be wholly successful in its attempt to exert absolute control (1990, 76). Women's desire for sexual, textual, and social freedoms can be contained but not annihilated. And as long as efforts to control women are mobilized, figures such as the femme fatale will surface to question and challenge the precariousness of patriarchal domination.