THE Biblical episode of the Last Supper, as told in all four of the gospels, is one of the most well-known and referenced events in all of Christianity. The event takes place on Maundy Thursday, the night before Jesus was crucified, and thus tells the story of his final night as a man of flesh and blood. At this dinner, several important events happen: Jesus blesses the wine and the cup in the ceremony of the Eucharist, he claims that one of his 12 apostles will betray him, and he gives a final sermon or “farewell discourse.” Many artists have created their own visual representations of the dinner, but the most famous portrayal is Leonardo da Vinci’s 15ft × 29ft mural L’Ultima Cena (referred to henceforth as The Last Supper), one of the most recognizable pieces of art in history.

During the twentieth century, film became a popular medium for both artistic expression and social criticism. In the 60s and 70s, two films featured extended scenes that appropriated the well-known religious image of da Vinci’s mural in order to make a statement about religion, and did so in a way that would resonate with the traditionally Catholic countries of Cuba and Spain. Although the Catholic doctrine speaks of charity and mercy, the disadvantaged characters in the film receive only temporary kindness and then are quickly forgotten. By using traditional religious symbols to show that not all of God’s children receive the same treatment, the directors are able to undermine Catholicism and show its sometimes nefarious byproducts, such as fascism and marginalization.

In 1961, Luis Buñuel’s film Viridiana told the story of a young woman who, about to take her vows as a nun, turns her late uncle’s
house into an “albergue,” or rooming house for the poor and homeless. The Last Supper scene features the vagrants that she is sheltering and shows the house descending into debauchery and destruction, instead of the peaceful, holy atmosphere that Viridiana was trying to maintain. Viridiana was considered blasphemous for its time for condemning the counterproductive nature of Christian charity, which, in Buñuel’s own words, “produce catástrofes, el estropicio de la casa por los mendigos, riñas entre estos, la posible violación de Viridiana” (quoted in Pérez 119). Buñuel further angered the church by framing the riotous events of the film within a religious context by using Handel’s Messiah and re-enacting the poses of The Last Supper with homeless people, an act that has been classified as a “perverse appropriation” and “parodic rewriting” (Gutiérrez-Albilla 1) of an important and recognizable Christian image.

Tomás Gutiérrez Alea studied at the Centro Sperimentale film school in Rome in the 1950s, when it was “awash in the Neorealist influences of Roberto Rossellini and Luis Buñuel” (Britannica). So, it is fitting that his 1976 film La última cena would appropriate the same religious image as Viridiana. The film showed a pious sugar plantation owner in Cuba who holds a large banquet and attempts to teach his slaves about religion and the necessity of suffering for eternal happiness. While the slaves believe that they are being shown kindness, they are merely being placated, and the landowner does not give them the following day off of work as he promised to do, leading to a slave revolt. This film also makes anti-religious commentary through the actions of the count and the hypocritical ideologies that he preaches.

In this paper, I will compare and contrast the two films’ messages about religion and how it was instrumental in dominating and exploiting the members of the lowest classes in both 20th-century Spain and late 18th-century Cuba. Several authors, such as Julián Daniel Gutiérrez-Albilla and Anton Karl Kozlovic, have written about the religious symbolism in Viridiana or La última cena, and a few authors have even connected the films by speaking of Gutiérrez Alea’s admiration of Buñuel, the intertextuality of the two films, and their “common practice of using religious history to highlight practices and aspects of consciousness” (Schroeder 82). However, these are brief mentions, and in order to get to the real message of the films, one must understand the religious context from which the Last Supper scenes are drawn.
Both Buñuel and Gutiérrez Alea attempt to appropriate a 15th-century artistic representation of a Biblical story in order to make a statement in the 20th century. In addition to the image of da Vinci’s mural, the elements of the Biblical story of the Last Supper such as the characters, the message, and the final betrayal all serve to make the films legible to a Christian audience and to make statements about religion, rather than blasphemining God as many Christian critics claimed. Neither film speaks out against God, but both films examine the methods by which God’s teachings are presented, frequently in a critical manner.

In Viridiana, the title character is portrayed as a kind, chaste, devout, Christian woman who is completely blameless for the events in the film. She does everything out of kindness, and consequently is taken advantage of or victimized by almost everyone around her. One of the vagrants describes her as “nuestra santa protectora que es persona decente,” and she seems to genuinely care for the poor. Before the Last Supper scene in the film, Viridiana serves the vagrants food, circulates around the table, and never sits down. She calls everyone by name, feeds them, and cares for the vagrant who is accused of having leprosy.

The count, the central character in La última cena, is a religious man who is represented as self-righteous and devout. In order to teach the slaves about Christianity and the selected values associated with it during Holy Week, the count asks that twelve slaves be selected at random for his supper, symbolizing the twelve apostles. The count refers to the group as “el Señor y sus discípulos,” and tells the slaves that the apostles were like Jesus’ slaves. He participates in some Christ-like activities such as washing his slaves’ feet before the dinner, teaching them lessons at the dinner table, and “humbling” himself by not punishing Sebastián when he spits in the count’s face. As Paul Schroeder states, “the results of the count’s deformations of emancipatory Christianity into dogmatic Catholicism are, at best, schizophrenia, at worse, hypocrisy” (83). While Viridiana is helping the poor out of charity and good will, the count is hosting the slaves in order to maintain their compliance and preserve his social standing as the owner of the plantation.

Whether the central, “higher-class” characters in each film are portrayed as good or bad, they are still depicted as “superior” to the poor and disenfranchised characters. The “disciples” in the two films, both the slaves and the vagrants, are separated from the rest of society through visual cues, linguistic differences, and their actions. The slaves
in *La última cena* are all dressed the same in white frocks, and with their bare chests and mouths full of food, they appear uncivilized and out of place at the master's table. They refer to themselves in the third person as “negro Antonio” or “negro Pascual,” and when the count explains the concept of the Eucharist, they do not understand it and consider it cannibalism. Likewise, the beggars in *Viridiana* have shabby clothes and missing teeth, the women are carrying crying children, and some of the beggars have infirmities such as blindness or legions. However, while the slaves in *La última cena* are generally tranquil and only occasionally disruptive, the beggars in *Viridiana* engage in a wide variety of socially unacceptable behavior during the dinner scene such as smoking, drinking, telling lewd jokes, destroying property, throwing food, dancing, fighting, groping and engaging in sexual acts, and yelling at the children who are crying in the background.

Both groups of “disciples” have different reactions to the characters that represent Christianity and attempt to impart its values. The vagrants under Viridiana’s care seem to respect and honor her; they ask her permission to do everything and try to only say pleasant and decent things in her presence. However, when Viridiana retires and leaves them alone for their supper, they descend into mayhem and recklessness. In the dinner scene, the presence of Handel’s “Hallelujah Chorus,” a song that is usually heard at concert halls during the Advent season, creates even more of a sense of chaos and serves as a strange counterpoint to the sinful activities that are happening.

Unlike Viridiana, the count does very little to help or lift up the slaves; he says that they are stupid and that Don Manuel the overseer is right to mistreat them. However, the count does try to form a bond with the slaves during the dinner by convincing them that he is like them; he sings, he tells jokes, and tries to show solidarity with them by telling them that Don Manuel is a sinful man who is not going to heaven. However, while the count is attempting to bond with the slaves, he is preaching to them as well. First, he tells them about the Eucharist, and passes the bread and cup around as Jesus did at the Last Supper. He frees the slave Pascual to show them that freedom is not real happiness because the slaves have nowhere to go. He tells them that Eve is the one to blame for sin because of her temptation of Adam, and his main point is that real happiness to suffer and work hard for the sake of God and their eternal souls, and the slaves laugh at him in response. Through their reject-
tion of the count’s Christian teachings and the presence of African elements at the table, such as music and the word “ndoko,” which means “sex,” the slaves are constructing an identity that is based on the rejections of the teachings the count is trying to impart. When Sebastián speaks of the creation story and tells of the Truth with the head of a Lie, not only do the other slaves listen, but the viewer hears what the slaves really think of the count and of Christianity: both are nothing but empty promises and false hope.

Another principal difference between Viridiana and La última cena is the presence of women at the Last Supper; several of the vagrants in Viridiana are women, and even though they fall into some traditional roles such as getting plates and tending to the children, they are just as lewd as the men. In fact, the pose from The Last Supper is at the behest of a female vagrant, Enedina, who claims that she is going to take their portrait, but instead just flashes them and laughs, which Buñuel dismisses as “una vieja broma infantil española” (quoted in Pérez 123). The dinner is chaotic for some of the vagrants and fun for others, but for all of the vagrants, the dinner is a temporary reclamation of the power that has so long been denied to them. While the actual Last Supper was a fellowship among the friends and voluntary followers of Christ, both La última cena and Viridiana feature characters on the margins of society who get to experience a small part of the life of their oppressors, even though the experience is fleeting and does not change their lives for the better. Although a religious presence in the lives of the poor brought them temporary happiness or fulfillment, it only ends in death, in the case of La última cena, or expulsion from the house, in the case of Viridiana.

If one follows the notion that all men are equal in God’s eyes, religion would be an equalizer, and it initially appears to be so in La última cena; not only are the slaves eating at the same table as the count, but there is social stratification among the slaves as well. One of the count’s house slaves is accidentally sent to work in the fields and begs the count to take him back, while another slave, Bangoché, speaks of his former life as a king in Africa. At the table, the count tries to treat them as equals, but his true intention is to control them with preaching and false promises. When the count tells the slaves that they don’t have to work on Good Friday, they are pleased, and as the count slowly falls into a drunken sleep, the slaves argue whether or not he is a good man. How-
ever, the count reveals his selfish and dishonest nature when he is carried away from the table and says that he wishes the slaves would never wake up.

Religion serves as an equalizer more effectively in *Viridiana*, as it is Viridiana’s Christian charity that brings the vagrants into the house in the first place. When she leaves them alone to their supper, she is showing that she trusts them as her equals and does not feel the need to supervise them. However, instead of vindicating this conviction, the vagrants take advantage of Viridiana’s naïveté and betray her trust, just as Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus after the Last Supper.

All four of the Gospels claim that on the night of the Last Supper, Jesus indicated that one of his apostles would betray him, and according to the gospels of Matthew and John, Jesus singled out Judas Iscariot. In the various artistic representations of the Last Supper, it is not always possible to identify every apostle, but the classic artists generally found a way of singling out Judas, whether he was turning away from Jesus, holding a bag of money, not wearing a halo like the other apostles, or leaning his elbow on the table as he does in da Vinci’s mural. He is generally seated at the right hand of Jesus, although not always next to him, and appears to blend in with the other apostles unless one is to observe carefully.

In *Viridiana*, according to Buñuel, “los mendigos están cenando y casualmente forman una composición como el cuadro de Leonardo,” (quoted in Pérez 122) dismissing the religious indignation in reaction to the scene. The blind vagrant “was positioned in the traditional ‘Jesus’ spot and called, very appropriately, ‘Jesús’” (Kozlovic 155). While Jesús does not have any real impact on the plot of the movie, he “rambled on about Biblical topics such as the four horsemen, the angels of the apocalypse, the breaking of the 5th seal, the Last Judgment, and the Sermon on the Mount” (Kozlovic 155). He escapes unscathed after the dinner, and most of the vagrants scatter and are not seen again. At Jesus’ right at the table is the toothless vagrant who was accused of being a leper and essentially serves as the “Judas” character at the end of the movie. Viridiana is the one who is betrayed; when she returns to the house after the dinner, one of the vagrants tries to rape her while the “Judas” character watches, assuring her that nothing is going to happen to her because they are all “gente de bien.” There is no clear leader among the vagrants, and even though Viridiana was not at the table for the Last Supper, they
all betray her in some way by destroying her uncle’s house or trying to take her purity.

In La última cena, the count very clearly establishes himself as the Christ character, but he betrays the slaves when he does not keep his word about giving them a day off on Good Friday. During the dinner, the count addresses Sebastián as “Judas,” referring to his earlier attempt to escape, and when the count brings Sebastián to his right-hand seat, Sebastián spits in his eye. Although the count is attempting to forge a bond to keep his slaves under control, neither the slaves nor the count have any reason to be loyal. When the slaves learn that they have been deceived, they revolt and burn down the mill, and the original “disciples” at the dinner are killed one by one. Sebastián is the only one to survive, as he trusted in Don Gaspar, who hid him, protected him, and later helped him escape. Sebastián’s distrust of the “Christ” character saved him, as he sought out someone who would actually help him instead of just giving him empty promises. Sebastián was able to see the world as a struggle for power and domination instead of seeing the world through a religious framework that didn’t allow for his ideas or make sense with his situation.

What, then, is the purpose of appropriating the story of the Last Supper and its corresponding imagery in films about 18th-century Cuba and 20th-century Spain? If one examines the presence of religious elements in Viridiana, it appears to be more about art and music associated with Christianity as opposed to Christianity itself. The da Vinci painting of The Last Supper and Handel’s Messiah are not Christian teachings, but rather art inspired by Christianity. Luis Buñuel seems to be using these elements to show the pervasive presence of Catholicism in Spain, and when he combines them with lewd acts and shocking imagery, it reflects the “grotesque mode” of Spanish literature and cinema. While there are social messages in the film about poverty and religion, the principal purpose of the appropriation seems to be for shock value. Through Buñuel’s “uniquely Spanish style of blasphemy” (Podol 200), he is able to convey his messages, as “his use of the grotesque…serves primarily to reflect the distorted nature of social reality” (Podol 201). As he shocks the viewer by confronting them with the familiar and then changing it, Buñuel “transforms the conventional function of objects so that they fulfill a different material and symbolic function” (Gutiérrez-Albilla 1) and forces the viewer to reconsider the familiar.
Meanwhile, *La última cena* attacks not the works of Christian artists, but rather the rhetoric of pious Christians. With this direct attack, Gutiérrez Alea makes a profound statement about the role of Christianity in the history of slavery. In this film, he portrays “eighteenth-century slaves as national symbols” (Gordon 301) for the African heritage of Cuba and a history of colonization and enslavement. The slaves also show how difficult it is to attempt to leave one’s place in society, and they illustrate “the futility of acting within a system...in order to realize change” (Gordon 306). Certain people can escape their social station with outside help, and Gutiérrez Alea’s film showed how the outside help did not come from the Christians, but from a man who disobeyed them. Through this example, the viewer sees not only the culpability of Christians in the time of slavery, but also that people could be good and righteous without a religious framework to guide them.

In both films, the directors show the viewer a situation in which the act of a Last Supper gives oppressed people hope of reclaiming some power in their lives, but in the end, the hope is taken away and the situation is only made worse. The “disciples” are surrounded by Christian music, teachings, and ideologies to which they cannot relate, the Christ character offers no permanent solution to their problems, and they are once again left alone in a cruel and oppressive society. In 1960s Spain, the notion of the false hope of religion was considered blasphemous, but when Cubans were forced to look 200 years into their past, the unethical use of religious doctrine to control the lower classes is history rather than speculation.

**THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY**

**WORKS CITED**


