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Linda M. Willem  
*Butler University*, lwillem@butler.edu

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Highlighting the Hidden: Visual Representation in Gutiérrez Aragón’s Demonios en el jardín

Linda M. Willem
Butler University

According to Spanish film maker Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón, there is an intimate relationship between the family and the state, with the traits of the family mirroring those of the state in which it exists: “la primera célula del Estado es la familia, y si el Estado, por definición, es opresivo, la familia es igualmente opresiva” (García Fernández 331). “Yo utilizo la familia en mis películas porque es muy real, muy testimonial. La familia repite fielmente la estructura social o estatal” (Payán and López 27). In Demonios en el jardín (1982) Gutiérrez Aragón uses the metaphor of the family not only to criticize the oppressiveness of the Franco regime, but also to suggest the corruption and deceit at its very core.

The final scene of the film shows various characters posing for a family portrait. After the photographer flashes the bulb, the freeze-framed image on the screen suddenly turns to black and white, thereby simulating the photo that has been recorded by the camera. This is the closing image over which the film’s credits are run. Thus, the audience’s parting view of this family is through a photo of all its members grouped together in a display of family solidarity. But the audience knows that just moments before this photo was taken, Juan, the handsome younger brother in the back row of the picture, was shot by his sister-in-law Ana with whom he has been having an affair. The coat casually draped over his shoulder hides his bullet wound, just as the forced smiles on the faces of the characters hide the truth about the jealousies that divide their family. Through this closing image Gutiérrez Aragón underscores the hypocrisy of this family by asking the audience to contrast the apparently happy characters in the photo with the reality of their situation. Indeed, this final shot represents the culmination of Gutiérrez Aragón’s careful staging of scenes throughout the film to visually depict the lies, secrecy, and false appearances that characterize the dynamics of this family. In this article I will examine three aspects of this film’s mise-en-scène—props, lighting, and costume—to show how they contribute toward the overall impression of dishonesty and duplicity existing within this family, and by extension, existing within the Franco government.

Props

The visual equation between the family and the state is made in the film’s opening shot, where preparations for a family wedding are seen immediately after a close-up on the yoke-and-arrows emblem of the Falange has filled the screen. It is 1942 and the two factions of the civil war—the nationalists and the republicans—have now become the winners and the losers, respectively, of that war. Like Spain, this family is a house divided. All of its members, save one, were aligned with the nationalists during the war. The rojilla in their midst is Angela, an orphaned cousin whom Juan has seduced and will soon abandon in order to seek his fortune in Madrid within the falangist hierarchy. This organization becomes a recurring motif in the film not only because of Juan’s affiliation with it, but also because its emblem is inscribed on a cigarette lighter that originally belongs to Juan and is later given to Juanito, his son by Angela. The lighter first appears during a meeting between Juan and Ana just before her wedding. After using it to light Ana’s cigarette, Juan begins to flirt with her in a teasing manner, saying that although her teeth are too big and her eyes are slightly crossed, she is the most beautiful woman he has ever seen in his life. Ana takes pleasure in Juan’s words despite her impending marriage to Juan’s brother Oscar, just as she enjoys the cigarette despite her soon-to-be mother-in-law’s disapproval of smoking by women. Thus, these two props—Juan’s lighter and Ana’s cigarette—are involved in the secret collusion between Ana and Juan, and the repeated appearance of these props continues the illicit associations established in this scene. For example, Juanito uses the lighter to illuminate his way in the dark as he steals into the storehouse filled with the family’s contraband goods. The lighter thus combines Juanito’s covert activities (being up late at night) with those of his family (engaged in black marketeering). Furthermore, the initial scene between Ana and Juan is later replayed between Ana and the seven year old Juanito one night in the darkness of his bedroom, with Juanito lighting Ana’s cigarette with his father’s lighter and repeating his father’s words about her teeth, eyes, and beauty. Thus, the lighter serves to link Juan and Juanito together as charming manipulators, and the forbidden cigarette reinforces the conspiratorial nature of the bond that ties Ana and Juanito together.

Whereas Ana’s relationship with Juan is sexual, her alliance with Juanito is based on her willingness to take him to late night movies without his mother’s knowledge. These distinct, but equally covert, activities become associated with two additional recurring props: Juan’s bull and Juanito’s filmstrip.

In an early scene of the film as Oscar is dressing for his wedding, he tells Juan of his plans to slaughter the bull, albeit over Juan’s objections. This point of contention between the two brothers becomes all the more problematic when the bull ruins the wedding ceremony. The bull’s sudden explosive entrance into the darkly lit church through the sun-streaked doorway is the most arresting image in the film.1 The bull clearly represents the disruptive presence of Juan in Oscar’s and Ana’s marriage. But

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1Payán and López liken the irreal quality of this scene to the scene in Gutiérrez Aragón’s Sondambulos where the mounted police invade the quiet of the Biblioteca Nacional (91).

Romance Languages Annual VIII (1997): 678–80
the prominence of the bull’s horns in the framing of this image also underscores the sexual nature of the situation because it visually represents the Spanish expression “ponerle cuernos a alguien,” commonly used in referring to a cuckolded husband. Juan tries to calm down the wedding party by saying that the bull simply is playing around, but while leaving the church to go after the bull, he passes a man who is tending to a minor wound he sustained during the fracas. Given the connection that has been established between Juan and the bull, this “playful” behavior by the bull suggests that Juan’s romantic dalliances also can hurt others unintentionally. Later that evening when Oscar and Juan quarrel over whether or not the bull should be killed, Oscar takes a gun out of its hiding place in the storeroom. Although he is unable to shoot the animal, Juan so provokes him that he does pull the trigger while aiming at his brother. The empty gun fails to fire, but the staging of this scene makes an implicit connection between Oscar’s declared intention to kill the bull (as a symbol of Juan) and his unspoken desire to kill Juan himself. Throughout the remainder of the film the bull reappears several times. While Juan is physically absent from the household, the bull is docile. But when Juan secretely returns home as a fugitive after embezzling government funds, the bull becomes more aggressive and chases characters around the family compound. This disruptive behavior on the part of the bull foreshadows the effect that Juan’s renewed presence will have on the family.

Just as the bull is suggestive of the sexual liaison between Ana and Juan, the filmstrip is an appropriate prop to indicate the kind of relationship that Ana has with Juanito. It is through Ana that Juanito learns about the glamorous and forbidden world of the cinema. Indeed, Juanito’s very first visit to a movie theater is with Ana, who sneaks him out of the house so he can see a newsreel in which Juan momentarily appears as part of Franco’s entourage. Afterwards the projectionist splices out the segment containing Juan’s image and gives it to the boy. This filmstrip later appears as a prop in a scene where Ana is describing to Juanito a movie that was banned by the Pope but that she has seen nonetheless. As Ana speaks, she smokes a cigarette; and as Juanito listens, he holds the secretly acquired filmstrip in his hands. Significantly, when Ana reaches the point in the story where she mentions the good-for-nothing boyfriend of the movie’s protagonist—her “novio muy golfo”—Juanito raises the filmstrip to look at his father. Thus, an implicit connection is made between the movie character’s behavior and that of Juan. As Ana continues with her plot summary, the camera slowly pans to the wall upon which the shadows cast by Ana and Juanito are seen. The rectangular border around the shadows and the whiteness of the light both combine to create an image that is reminiscent of a movie screen with Ana and Juanito as the actors engaged in an intimate conversation. Thus, Gutiérrez Aragón’s use of lighting stylistically reinforces the content of this scene, while also associating the secluded atmosphere of Juanito’s dimly lit bedroom with that of a darkened theater.

Lighting

The above example is but one instance in which lighting techniques enhance the furtive quality of what is happening in certain scenes. Indeed, much of the film takes place under the cover of darkness, with characters engaged in immoral, illegal, or forbidden activities. The judicious placement of light within these dark spaces reveals what is going on while simultaneously emphasizing the characters’ desire to conceal what they are doing. For example, in an early scene Angela and Gloria are in the storeroom getting contraband oil for a customer. The only light in the room comes from a hand-held lamp, which illuminates the faces of the women but leaves everything else in darkness. The low angle of the light, along with the strong attached shadows resulting from it, stress both the clandestine nature of the enterprise and the tension between the two women. Similarly, in the scene where Ana is robbing the safe, the darkness of the room nearly obscures what is happening, but just enough side lighting falls on Ana to allow Juanito, and the audience, to identify her as the thief. Then when she goes to the storeroom, shadows cast on the wall reveal the identity of the secret lover for whom she has stolen the money. While Juanito watches from the yard, he sees Ana’s shadow meet Juan’s in an embrace before both shadows descend to the floor where they disappear. This event is not seen in clear view by either Juanito or the audience, but it is witnessed all the same. Thus, through these shadows Juanito learns the truth that has been hidden from him.

Indeed, shadow and light often are used in scenes where Juanito gains knowledge through stealth. In the two parallel scenes that take place in the doctor’s office, Juanito hides in the doorway separating the examination room from the office in order to eavesdrop on the diagnosis that the doctor is giving to his mother and grandmother. The light coming from the office illuminates his face and the front part of his body, but the remaining portions are left in the shadows. As the doctor speaks, the camera moves in to focus on Juanito’s face, which registers pleasure during the first visit (when the doctor advises the women to indulge Juanito’s every whim) but shows his dismay at hearing on his second visit that his complete cure means that he no longer should be pampered. His reactions reflect a childish lack of concern for what is really important—whether or not he has a serious illness—while simultaneously showing a keen grasp of how he can exploit the situation to his advantage. Similarly, when Juanito’s desire to see the banned film that Ana has told him about leads him to sneak into the projection booth of the movie theater without even Ana’s consent, he watches the movie through the small projection window. As the light from the film reflects on his face, he closes his eyes and says “Este es mi primer pecado mortal.” In an interview Gutiérrez Aragón has stated that Juanito is seven years old, and therefore, he has reached the age of reason (Torres

2Since the shadows of Ana and Juan are reminiscent of those cast on the wall by Ana and Juanito earlier in the film, this scene further reinforces the similarity between Juanito and his father.
17). Thus, Juanito's statement is not entirely humorous. Though physically a child, he is as morally responsible for his actions as the adult characters are for theirs.

**Costume**

Of all the knowledge that Juanito acquires about the adult world around him, the most important centers on his discovery of his father's true profession. This revelation is made in the film through a dramatic use of costume. Living in his grandmother's home, Juanito has heard nothing but praise about Juan's connections and influential position within Franco's retinue. Thus, for Juanito his father has taken on mythic proportions, and the boy is extremely excited when he is permitted to visit Juan during an official visit by Franco to his area. In order to convey the disillusionment that Juanito feels when he learns that his father is only a waiter, Gutiérrez Aragón stages the scene as a long series of meetings with members of Franco's entourage before Juanito sees his father. The camera is situated at Juanito's height, and it cuts between point-of-view shots and ones registering the look of wonderment and excitement on Juanito's face. As he walks through the high grass leading to Franco's encampment, Juanito encounters a wide variety of colorful uniforms worn by the soldiers, Moorish guards, priests, and members of the guardia civil who pass by him. The camera registers Juanito's perspective as he looks up at these exotically dressed men, who take on a larger-than-life quality due to the low angle from which they are viewed. Finally, Juanito reaches the top of the hill and now must look down. Shot from a high angle, the figures below him seem small in comparison. When Juanito sees a man in a white waiter's jacket turn around to greet him, he realizes that it is his father. The impact of this scene comes from the juxtaposition of Juanito's expectations with the reality of the situation. That reality is visually represented. The sham of Juan's entire life is revealed to Juanito in a split second, without the use of words.3

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John Hopewell has stated that nearly every character in this film is false (200). Indeed, Gloria and Oscar are black marketers, Ana is an adulteress, Juanito pretends to be sicker than he actually is in order to get what he wants, and Juan not only seduces women with honeyed lies but also steals money from both his employer and his family. However, it is not simply the actions of these characters, but rather, it is the framing of those actions within the film's intricate visual structure that establishes an overall tone of fraud and deception. Through an interrelated use of props, lighting, and costume Gutiérrez Aragón emphasizes the selfishness, duplicity, and immorality of this family. Furthermore, these negative traits are implicitly transferred to the Falange through the family's alliance with that organization. Finally, by making the most sympathetic member of the family an outsider because of her republican beliefs, Gutiérrez Aragón suggests that corruption and pretense are not merely features of governments in general, but of the Franco regime in particular.

**Works Cited**


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3Gutiérrez Aragón has stated that his intention in this scene was to link the personal disillusionment that children feel when they find out that their fathers are simply people instead of heroes with the political disillusionment that children of the posguerra felt when they finally realized that Franco was just a short, fat man with a high pitched voice rather than a mythic leader (Torres 158–59).