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Verónica

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Verónica

Abstract

This is a film review of *Verónica* (2017), directed by Paco Plaza.



Verónica (2017), dir. Paco Plaza

Verónica, directed by Paco Plaza, is a fun horror film full of intense moments and some well-timed jump scares. The protagonist, Verónica, is a 15 year old who becomes the primary caregiver of her three younger siblings after her father's death. She has twin sisters, Irene and Lucía, and a brother, Antoñito. The cause of his death is never revealed but it has left Verónica's mother in a state where she can no longer care for her children; she works long hours and rarely sees them.

Verónica attends a religious (presumably Catholic) school that is composed primarily of girls. One day before class, the teacher is talking about the upcoming eclipse. The teacher mentions that some early cultures used to think blood sacrifices of the human variety were necessary during an eclipse. This juxtaposition is our first glimpse at the positions of organized (Verónica's religious school) versus dangerous (Ouija boards) religious experience. As the rest of the class heads outside to witness the eclipse, Verónica, her best friend Rosa, and Rosa's new friend Diana sneak into the school's basement. When Verónica realizes that Rosa invited Diana she is clearly jealous of Rosa's new friend. Here, in the dark, cluttered, and most forgotten part of the school, they try to summon

Verónica's father using an Ouija board. As they are trying to do so, the glass they are using as a planchette breaks and the board splits in half. Verónica is left unconscious on the floor muttering to herself while Diana runs for help. The thing they summoned wasn't Verónica's father but some other phantasm that begins following her around. As a horror/thriller film it is fun but doesn't take the genre in any perceivably new direction. The plot is pushed forward in typical horror film style but the best part is the dynamics between Verónica and her siblings. These interactions are the adhesive that keeps the film interesting and a further exploration of these dynamics would be welcome.

In every encounter Verónica has with the phantasm it causes some sort of physical harm in the form of bruises or bite marks. There is one change that stands out and helps guide the audience to see this as a coming of age story. When Verónica regains consciousness after the Ouija board incident, she finds herself in the nurse's office. The nurse asks multiple questions about whether she's fainted before or if diabetes runs in her family. The nurse also asks if Verónica has begun menstruating and is surprised when, at 15, she hasn't. Later in the film we return to the nurse's question. After Verónica falls asleep, she wakes up but cannot move. Her siblings then enter her bedroom complaining about being hungry and they begin chewing on her arms. Verónica screams to her mother for help. Her mother shows up and simply says "it's time for you to grow up." Verónica wakes up and realizes it was all a dream. That night she had her first period. This is a familiar horror trope that is also found in films like *Carrie*. Where this seems to differ is that instead of Verónica's bodily changes being an indication that bodies (specifically women's bodies) are scary, it is rather a series of things happening to Verónica that lead to mounting anxieties. The previous surprise of the nurse helps to ground bodily changes as normal while Verónica's night terror that accompanied her period orients this as another contribution to her already stressful life.

The phantasm usually shows itself to Verónica as a dark and faceless figure. However, one time it had appeared to her as her father and Antoñito says that their father came and was reading to him at night. This manifestation of the phantasm as their deceased father is not insignificant. Verónica points out that it does not appear if their mother is around. It is a manifestation of the stress and anxiety that accompanies Verónica's coming of age while simultaneously needing to perform the role of an adult for her siblings and the loss of her best friend.

Verónica's dead father is the only male character who has a pertinent speaking role which is just uttering "Verónica" as scarily as possible when he comes back as a phantasm. This is the only time we see him aside from the photo she brings to the Ouija board outing. The lack of men isn't explicit and in a way this alleviates the requirement to code the bodies with a specific gender. Clearly Verónica's mother is struggling with the death of her husband. While struggling with grief shouldn't make her a weaker character, it should make her human. However, this does create added pressure for her daughter, Verónica. Verónica feels as though she has lost her best friend, her body is changing, and she has to be a stand-in parent while simultaneously going to school, all this while suffering with the same grief as her mother about the death of her father. This pressure contributes to the creation of the phantasm. When her mother is there, the social pressure is alleviated and the phantasm doesn't appear.

The idea that Ouija boards possess any power at all is founded upon the concept that institutions deemed religious have power. By this I mean two things. First, in *Verónica* the religion that possesses this power is a form of Christian religion. This is the religious technology that Ouija boards threaten and why any authoritative figure in Verónica's life deems Ouija boards extremely dangerous. In one scene, for example, Verónica is talking to one of the nuns, Sister Death (a name given to her by the school kids). She is the only other person who can see the phantasm that follows

Verónica and tells her just how dangerous tampering with the supernatural can be. The place of Ouija boards is presented as an antithesis to a dogmatic and Christian tradition. By placing Verónica as a participant in activities unwelcome within her larger social structures at the beginning of the film, she is framed as isolated. Second, the use of overtly Christian tones is a very normal thing in the horror genre. It is assumed that this is a religious language that most of the viewers will easily understand. Moreover, it is a religious language with a complimentary antithesis of Ouija boards, seances, and ghosts. The structure of the church is always assumed as dogmatic. This is not touched on specifically in *Verónica* but the religious school is positioned in such a way as to provide something for the phantasm to work against. The phantasm is uprooting and tormenting Verónica precisely because it has uprooted the larger organization she is a part of.

This film is a psychological thriller that is perfect for a psychoanalytic reading. *Verónica* follows a trajectory familiar to many other psychological thrillers, producing a few jump scares and moments that send shivers up your spine. It is very enjoyable and while it may not push boundaries explicitly it does present an engaging story that focuses more on the character dynamics than it does on the horror. This is where it shines. The dynamic between Verónica and her siblings is fun to watch and the film would be stronger if this were put into clearer focus instead of the phantasm.