

## REVIEWS OF LUIS BUÑUEL'S *ABISMOS DE PASIÓN*

Vincent Canby, "Buñuel's Bronte," *New York Times*, Dec. 27, 1983

<http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9C03EFD91538F934A15751C1A965948260>

Of all of the Mexican films that Luis Buñuel made for the mass market of Spanish-speaking audiences, his 1954 screen adaptation of Emily Brontë's "Wuthering Heights," called "Abismos de Pasion" when released in Mexico, is probably the work that's most full of riches for those of us who consider Buñuel one of the great film directors of all time. It opens today at the Public Theater, a premiere of sorts, though it was shown by the Museum of Modern Art in 1976 and may have been shown at Spanish-language theaters here in the 1950's.

"Abismos de Pasion" - the Spanish title seems much more appropriate than the Brontë original - is an almost magical example of how an artist of genius can take someone else's classic work and shape it to fit his own temperament without really violating it. This "Wuthering Heights" is nothing if not Spanish in its tone. It's also Roman Catholic down to its toes in the way that it reflects the particular obsessions of the self-described nonbeliever who made it.

Among the more remarkable things about "Abismos de Pasion" is how little Buñuel has changed the story, at least the story as adapted by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur for the 1939 William Wyler screen version.

It's still the tale of the mystical, all-consuming love of the well-born Cathy (here named Catalina) for her childhood sweetheart, the handsome, rudely tyrannical, former stable boy, Heathcliff, renamed Alejandro by Buñuel. The English moors are now the barren hills of rural Mexico and what once seemed to be a romantic rebellion against the genteel manners of Anglican England has now become a darker, timeless war between the forces of light and darkness.

Alejandro (Jorge Mistral) is driven not just by his love of Cathy and desire for revenge against the family that humiliated him as a boy. He has, as subsidiary characters say more than once, made a pact with the Devil, and we may well believe it. This is actually a far more reasonable explanation of how, during a mysterious absence, he acquired the enormous wealth that he now uses to humble his former masters. After all, rude, unmannerly stable boys don't easily become rich overnight.

Catalina (Irasema Dilian) is also a far gutsier, far less sentimental character than Merle Oberon's Cathy, who seemed primarily motivated by the willfulness of a pampered child. In Buñuel's scheme of things, the love that flows between Alejandro and Catalina is so strong - and so beyond analysis in any ordinary emotional or sexual terms - that we can take it that she is part of any pact that Alejandro may or may not have made with anyone, including Beelzebub. When Catalina announces that she loves Alejandro "more than the salvation of my soul," the point is to shock the Roman Catholic audiences as much as the other characters within the film.

Buñuel, of course, never makes any reference to the Devil without a wink of mock astonishment. In an opening message to the audience he tells us that what we're about to see is a story about characters at the mercy of their instincts and passions. To Catalina's faithful husband, Eduardo (Ernesto Alonso), and to his sister, Isabel (Lilia Prado), who loves Alejandro and, unfortunately, marries him, passions and instincts represent a hideous state of pre-Christian damnation.

Eduardo and Isabel are believers. They are among the saved. They are civilized, a point with which Buñuel has a good deal of fun as he shows us the studious Eduardo carefully pinning a live butterfly to a mat and Isabel out on a morning stroll, shooting vultures. If the civilized are more savage than the heathen, Buñuel would prefer the company of the lost.

There's also an astonishing amount of self-awareness in Buñuel's Catalina and Alejandro. They accept their fate as lovers who will go beyond the grave together with an unemotional kind of placidity. When Catalina warns Isabel not to marry Alejandro, it's not because she is jealous but because she knows that Isabel will be crushed casually and without anything that might be called redeeming malice - Isabel will have simply gotten in the way of fate.

At key moments, Miss Dilian displays a terrific fondness for the smug, self-satisfied smile, but that is a convention of the melodramatic acting of the time. She looks like any number of other blond Mexican actresses Buñuel used at this period of his career, representing an idealization later to be exemplified in the talent and the grand, chilly beauty of Catherine Deneuve in "Belle de Jour" and "Tristana." Mr. Mistral is a more than adequate Alejandro, though his handsomeness appears to be that of a Latin American spinoff of Victor Mature.

Mr. Alonso, who was later to play the title role in Buñuel's 1955 comic masterpiece, "The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz," is exceptionally good as Eduardo.

Among the other reasons that "Abismos de Pasion" is not to be missed is the film's final sequence, which is just as breathtaking as the final sequence of "Tristana" - and even more outrageous.

**Dennis Schwartz, "Wuthering Heights," *Ozus's World Movie Reviews*, April 16, 2006**

<http://homepages.erver.net/~ozus/wutheringheightsbunuel.htm>

Noted Spanish surrealist filmmaker Luis Buñuel takes a stab at doing Emily Brontë in this low-budget black and white version filmed in Mexico. It's too talky and has an overwrought dramatization that is all about setting a fierce gothic mood of sexual fever and deep emotional swings but has nothing to do with Brontë's story and substitutes a barren landscape of Mexico for a repressed pre-Victorian English society. Buñuel paints a grim picture through troubling images of the dreary ranch and farm houses, the barren hills and dessicated trees, the windlike heroine forced into accepting her ominous fate, the whipping rain storms, the buzzards making alarming noises in the yard and the deathlike prevailing atmosphere. The filmmaker follows the same story line as the 1939 William Wyler screen version, but gives it an unmistakable smouldering Mexican flavoring that is not without interest even though it has a different flavor from Brontë's novel by distancing itself too far from its two outsider protagonists .

Former servant Alejandro (Jorge Mistral) returns as a rich man to his boyhood home in rural Mexico after years of absence. He's driven to get revenge on the rich family that humiliated him as a youth and prevented him from marrying the only one he ever loved, Cathy (Irasema Dilián). She's now married to her wealthy bourgeois neighbor, the effete Eduardo (Ernesto Alonso), as she couldn't be certain if Alejandro would ever return for her and she needed to marry a man with substance. Her love for butterfly collector Eduardo is more refined, ordinary and of this world, while her unswerving love for Alejandro is passionate, eternal and without any boundaries. At one point Cathy mentions that she loves Alejandro "more than the salvation of my soul."

The former stable boy, who mysteriously accumulated great wealth, has schemed to get Cathy's brutish, abusive, slovenly, drunken and in debt gambler brother Ricardo (Luis Aceves Castañeda) under his thumbs. Ricardo has lost his farm house to gambling debts and Alejandro now holds the mortgage, choosing to allow those he hates such as Ricardo, his young abused son Jorge and the embittered two-faced servant Jose to remain in the house with him. Cathy is his adopted sister; her father adopted the orphan and then used him in an abusive way to do the farm work.

The overbaked melodrama reaches a high pitch with Cathy seeing Alejandro, and the jealous Eduardo eventually telling her to choose between them while forbidding her to ever see Alejandro again. The pregnant Cathy chooses to stay and obey her hubby. Alejandro then puts plan No. 2 into play and lures the love sick

animal-friendly sister of Eduardo, Isabel (Lilia Prado), to elope with him. Their marriage is one conceived in hell, whereas the gullible Isabel lives in misery in the farm house, in a separate bedroom from her hateful husband, and is surrounded by Cathy's remaining family members who all fiercely despise her. To boot, Eduardo refuses to allow poor Isabel to return--telling his gossipy servant Maria that she got what she deserved.

It's ultimately a story about how closely linked together are love and death (check out the sublime ending where a ghostly image of love turns into a shotgun blast) and how the weak characters are at the mercy of their basic instincts and uncontrollable passions. Buñuel pokes fun at the so-called civilized Eduardo and Isabel, and holds them up to ridicule for being so smug in their beliefs about goodness and of being more capable of doing harm to others than are those who made a pact with the Devil. Therefore, ironically, they will be saved in the end. While Alejandro and Cathy are perceived as heathens, who have also lost their humanness by being overwhelmed by their passions, hatreds and fears. Though they can't be saved in this world, Buñuel reserves a place for them in the afterlife where their deep love can be understood.

Though the film loses much of its force by discarding Brontë's framing scheme it, nevertheless, gains a power the other screen versions don't have through its unrelenting gothic ruthlessness.

**Caryn James, "No Depth on 'Wuthering Heights,'" *New York Times*, April 9, 1989**  
<http://www.nytimes.com/>

Of all the spirits fluttering over the moors of Wuthering Heights, the most restless, disturbed soul must be Emily Brontë's. Imagine her returning through the years, a ghostly presence hovering in movie theaters, watching what has become of her novel. She hears the audience sob and sniffle when Merle Oberon dies in Laurence Olivier's arms. She might cry, too, at the way William Wyler's 1939 film turns her furiously passionate Cathy and Heathcliff into star-crossed romantics, an overaged Romeo and Juliet.

Imagine Brontë sorting out the characters in Luis Bunuel's 1954 version, "Abismos de Pasion." In this Mexican abyss of passion, Cathy is the doomed, petulant Catalina. The larger-than-life Heathcliff, cut down to size and renamed Alejandro, has devilish sideburns and a cowboy hat. The farmhouse Brontë called Wuthering Heights now bears a distinct resemblance to the Ponderosa.

... The novel is virtually impossible to transfer whole to the screen. Its complicated tension between love and hate spans two generations, from the day Cathy's father brings the grimy foundling boy Heathcliff to Wuthering Heights, through the short-lived marriage of Heathcliff's son to Cathy's daughter. Its narrative is powerful but intricate, with most of the story told years after Cathy's death by the housekeeper, Nelly Dean. Yet film makers find the story irresistible, with its love sworn to live beyond the grave, and the visual drama of Yorkshire's moors.

... If Wyler's version is all thwarted romance, Bunuel's is all vengeance, centered on Heathcliff's vindictive marriage to Edgar's sister. Both are shallow offshoots of a story that is emphatically about depth. When Cathy dies and returns to haunt Heathcliff, Brontë is not talking about ghosts but about eternity.

Yet the Olivier-Oberon film reeks of Hollywood in 1939. Of all the now-classic films released that year - an amazing list that includes "Gone With the Wind," "The Wizard of Oz," "Goodbye, Mr. Chips" and "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" - the one that has aged least gracefully is "Wuthering Heights."

Its age is evident in its melodramatic language. ("Go on, Heathcliff!" says Cathy. "Run away! Bring me back the world!") It is obvious in the studio settings, and in the way sexual passion is transmuted into ethereal romance by two stars who seem stuck in some peculiar adolescence, for Olivier was then 32 years old and Oberon at least 28. At his best, Olivier is a perfect Heathcliff, mysterious and vehement; at his worst he is histrionic and florid. And at Cathy's deathbed, he manages to move from one extreme to the other in a single speech. But at least Olivier looks Byronic, with brooding eyes and a dark lock of hair perpetually falling on his forehead.

Merle Oberon looks like a china doll, and her less-than-adept acting is not helped by the film's hokey, ghost-story effects. When she delivers her greatest line, "Ellen, I am Heathcliff," there is a great swell of music, a bolt of lightning flashes in the window frame behind her and she faces the camera looking as startled as a scared chicken. At the recognition that her soul is twinned for eternity, the lightning flash might as well be a light bulb appearing over Oberon's head.

Even the lovers' outdoor scenes are studio-bound. Cathy and Heathcliff sit next to a huge rock that may not be plastic, but looks as if it is. In front of them, the heather sways back and forth violently, as if the wind machines have run amok. And behind them are clouds - stark, stiff, painted clouds that never budge in this terrific windstorm.

Fifty years after the film's release, audiences still sob at Cathy's death, though now they seem lost in the luxuriant, grand romance of old Hollywood. Whether you laugh or cry at its sentimentality, it is impossible to watch "Wuthering Heights" without realizing that they really don't make pictures like that anymore.

For all its obvious departures from the original, Buñuel's version is far more conscious of its source. "The characters are at the mercy of their own instincts and passions," reads a title card at the beginning. "Alejandro's love for Catalina is a fierce and inhuman feeling that can only be fulfilled through death. Most importantly, this picture tries to remain true to the spirit of Emily Brontë's novel" - or, as it reads in Spanish, "Emilia Bronte."

But by entering the story midpoint, Buñuel makes it impossible to understand how that fierce passion grew. His "Wuthering Heights" is like a bad play, with the characters forced into explanatory dialogue. "I loved her, but I also hated her," Heathcliff says of Cathy. However awkwardly the subtitles may be translated, that statement suggests the film's blunt, lifeless quality.

The film's only surreal scene, the one that seems most typical of Buñuel, is the final one in the crypt. Oddly, it comes directly from the novel. Late in the work - in the second-generation plot featuring Cathy's snippety daughter and Heathcliff's weakling son, characters no one ever wants to film - Heathcliff reveals that he has recently dug up Cathy's grave.

He opened her coffin lid and stared at her unchanged face. He loosened a plank from the side of her coffin, so that when his own was laid next to it - with a side plank removed from both - their dust could finally mingle. It is Buñuel's invention when the apparition of Cathy turns into the gun-toting Ricardo/Hindley. But the bizarre scene has more of Brontë's energy than anything else in the film.

It is intriguing to guess what Brontëan depths a truly surreal Buñuel interpretation might have captured. As Charlotte Brontë wrote of her sister's novel, "'Wuthering Heights' was hewn in a wild workshop." To this day, even as daring a director Buñuel has been too cautious to reinvent Emily Brontë's reckless passion on screen.