

Notes for Watching Luis Buñuel's *Abismos de Pasión: Cumbres Borrascosas*

Cumbres Borrascosas is a literal translation of Brontë's title, *Wuthering Heights*.

Background

Buñuel and Surrealism:

Surrealism was a literary, psychological, and philosophical movement starting in the 1920s; it rebelled against rationalism and realism. It strove to free the unconscious, automatic impulses and passions by rejecting reason, morality, and religion. Surrealists believed that suspending the conscious mind freed subconscious images. Thus, surrealist imagery, produced through automatism [*automatism*: the suspension of consciousness to allow uncensored thoughts] or spontaneity and intuition, expressed chance effects, unexpected or shocking juxtapositions, and non-rational combinations. Buñuel joined the Surrealists in Paris in the late 1920s and left the movement in 1932, though he remained on good terms with the surrealists.

L'amour fou, Surrealism, and Wuthering Heights:

Love as *l'amour fou* (mad love) is uncontrollable or obsessive passion, the kind of love that disorders the senses and sends lovers into a helpless whirl of desire and feeling. The lovers are completely immersed in each other and ignore social obligations, moral considerations, and religious dictates. It had a particular attraction for and was a key belief of the Surrealists. They saw the fevered passion of Heathcliff and Cathy as the classic expression of *l'amour fou*.

Buñuel on sexuality:

Buñuel sees sexuality as one of the forces determining our lives, and many actions generally regarded as inexplicable can, in fact, be explained as sexual aberration.

Buñuel on Abismos de Pasión:

"... I think it's faithful to the spirit of Emily Brontë. It's a very harsh film without concessions, and it respects the novel's attitude to love."

Wagner's Tristan and Isolde, death, and love:

Tristan is escorting Isolde to the court of his uncle King Mark to marry the King. Tristan and Isolde fall in love. Knowing they cannot be together, Isolde prepares a poisoned drink so that they can die together; Tristan drinks it, knowing it is poison. Expecting death, they exchange a long look of love, then passionately embrace. However, her maid Brangane has substituted a love potion for the poison. Act 1 stops here.

The opera ends with Tristan severely wounded and Isolde rushing to be with him. She urges him to live for an hour so they can be together, but he dies in her arms. Isolde sees Tristan calling her to join him; choosing death, she falls, transfigured, upon Tristan's body, after singing "Liebestod" (love-death). Her aria ends, "In the billowing torrent, / in the resonating sound, / in the wafting Universe of the world-Breath- / drown, / be engulfed- / unconscious- / supreme delight!"

Buñuel uses "Liebestod" as background music for the last scene.

The Movie

Buñuel's introductory statement:

"... Its characters are at the mercy of their own instincts and passions. They are unique beings for whom the social conventions do not exist. 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 Bronte's novel."

The story:

Buñuel gives almost no back story. No reason is given for Heathcliff's running way; Catalina and Alejandro vaguely refer to a quarrel and their anger. Would the film therefore be confusing to movie-goers who haven't read the novel?

The beginning, the ending and death:

The movie opens with gunshots; Catalina (Catherine) is shooting vultures in a gnarled tree, suggesting her connection with death and violence. She asserts, "They pass to death's liberty without feeling anything." Shooting—or is it killing?—is also an activity she enjoys and in which she finds freedom. Eduardo (Edgar) is introduced pinning a live butterfly to his butterfly collection; this activity reveals his character (a refined cruelty involving death but not the overt violence of Catalina) and his restrictive, possessive relationship with Catalina.

The movie also ends with a fatal shooting.

Is Alejandro's breaking into Catalina's tomb, with the long close-up of a rod being moved in the keyhole, a sexual image, as a few critics have suggested?

Alejandro (Heathcliff) and Catalina are drawn to death and their passion love, which ignores all other considerations (morality, religion, family, society). Such an obsessive love, *l'amour fou*, can only end in destruction and death. Is death the culmination of their love, as marriage and having children is the conventional culmination of love?

Motifs:

Insects:

Eduardo kills live butterflies. Later, there is a shot of case after case of his butterfly collection.

(Eduardo is not the sympathetic character Nelly describes in the novel.)

Ricardo feeds a fly to a spider, which quickly seizes it, foreshadowing Ricardo's murder of Alejandro.

Alejandro tells Isabel that he wants to crush her as one crushes a spider under a rock.

Music.

Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, especially "Liebestod."

Weather.

Heathcliff is associated with storm; it storms when he returns and when he runs away with Isabel. It storms when Eduardo refuses to lend Ricardo money.

Wind gales blow as Alejandro walks along a wall after Catalina's death.

Rain pounds down when he breaks a window to get in to see the dying Catalina, when he goes to her grave and as he forces the padlock of her tomb.

Heaven, hell, and the devil.

Maria hopes that Catalina will awaken in glory; Alejandro, that she will awaken in hell.

Alejandro is repeatedly connected with the devil. Maria and Jose refer to his having made a pact with the devil in return for wealth. Alejandro's demonic nature moves Jose to an exorcism, the burning of a frog, and taking it into Wuthering Heights; this ritual represents sacrifice and death as well as an effort to exorcize Alejandro's spirit.

Immediately after the Catalina's funeral procession through a barren landscape, Buñuel moves to a picture of hell on the wall of Wuthering Heights, then to Joseph reading from the Bible.

Animals.

The waiting buzzards suggest the intertwining of life and death.

The first scene of the hacienda (Thrushcross Grange) shows a pair of antlers on the wall.

A caged bird represents Catalina's view of her marriage and of Eduardo; she is both the caged bird, living in a passionless, confining marriage, and the keeper of the caged bird. She says to the bird, "It doesn't bother you to be locked up. You get my love."

Isabel's sentimentality and conventionality are expressed in her love of animals, as well as in her response to the child Jorge (Hareton).

After Eduardo calls Alejandro a beast, Catalina promises "never to look for him" (there is an ambiguity here; she does not promise never to see him again, but because of my very limited Spanish, I can't tell whether this ambiguity is Buñuel's or the translator's). Buñuel cuts to the slaughter of a screaming pig. The pig's slaughter foreshadows Alejandro's violent death. The pig reference is picked up again when Catalina asks Alejandro what if she were indifferent to his marrying Isabel; he replies, "I'd cut my throat right now." Alejandro would sacrifice his life for love of Catalina, while she would sacrifice Alejandro for the sake of convention and her pregnancy/child.

Nature images:

Buñuel uses nature images to express two of Brontë's themes: (1) the conflict between society, which confines with its conventions, and nature, which is associated with unrestrained passion, and (2) the connection of love and death. By connecting Catalina and Alejandro with nature, Buñuel suggests the non-rationality of their obsessive love, which rejects social, moral and religious restraint and considerations.

Buñuel frequently shoots exteriors, especially scrubby, arid landscape with leafless trees, rocks, and bleak mountains, with perhaps a narrow strip of sky.

Long shots center on individuals, who are dwarfed among the trees, rocks, and barrenness.

Trees appear often. Gnarled roots form the background for the opening credits. Catalina and Alejandro meet in the cavernous roots as twisted as their relationship—and as interconnected. It is also where they played as children. The tree functions as Buñuel's visual equivalent to Wyler's Pennistone Crag. Catalina's funeral procession is framed by a bare tree. In a long shot, Catalina watches Alejandro kiss Isabel in a dry gully, a dead twisted tree next to them.

Thunderclaps and curtains waving in the wind portray passion. The storm when Catherine dies parallels the lovers' agony.

When Catalina says, "I love Alejandro more than my souls's salvation" and goes on to say that her love is not of this world, she looks at the clouds; the camera pans to the clouds, then to the farm (Wuthering Heights) and Alejandro, a sequence which visually unites them to each other and to the natural world. Later Jose reinforces the cloud image and their connection to nature with a quotation, "and our life shall pass away as the trace of a cloud."

Other images:

Characters repeatedly walk up and down hills and stairs. Alejandro dominates Ricardo and Isabel as he comes down the stairs.

Joseph wears thick glasses to parallel his shortsighted, narrow vision of religion and others.

The farmhouse (Wuthering Heights) is old, bare, cave-like, with a painting of souls in hell on one wall. In contrast, the hacienda is filled with furniture, books, gun and butterfly collections.

The hacienda is enclosed by a high wall; Alejandro twice walks beside it, somewhat dwarfed by it.

Windows: Alejandro breaks the kitchen window to get in and later comes through the window to carry off Isabel; he breaks a window when locked out of the farmhouse. In an early shot in which the camera looks into her bedroom, Catalina looks through the window toward the farm; behind her, a large crucifix hangs over Eduardo and Catalina's bed; the camera moves in the direction she is looking to Alejandro at the farm. In a later close-up shot, she looks sadly through the grill work barring a window after locking herself in her room. Isabel twice looks out of windows to watch Catalina and Alejandro; once she steams the window with her breath, which Catalina notices and reacts to. Catalina several times gazes out the window toward Wuthering Heights

Alejandro:

Alejandro's hard nature is expressed visually in his uncharitably rejecting a beggar on his wedding day and in the dusty, cluttered storeroom, complete with cobwebs, that he assigns Isabel for her bedroom

Ending:

Wagner's *Liebtestod*, the final aria in *Tristan and Isolde*, plays for the violent ending. Catalina's outstretched arms morphing into Ricardo's shotgun literally turns love into death.

Does Catalina's being buried in a crypt echo Catherine's dying reference to a church thrown on her grave in the novel?

Alejandro dies in Catalina's coffin, on her body, so that in a sense they merge in death.

Buñuel fully develops the necrophilia implicit in Brontë's novel. Isabel advises Alejandro, "Shoot yourself on top of her tomb." Ricardo sneers to Isabel, "Your husband betrays you with a dead woman." Alejandro kisses her corpse and dies partly on top of her.

"Fin" appears while Alejandro lies in Catalina's coffin. Does the word merely end the movie, or does it imply that their love is ended—without any kind of resurrection? Is there a transcendence in their love, as there is in Isolde's aria, in Catalina's telling Eduardo that their love will end with death but her love for Alejandro will continue after death, or as there is in Catherine's speeches in the novel? After Alejandro's death, the crypt door bangs shut loudly, and the final chords of "Liebestod" play against a black screen.

Elements kept from the novel:

Jose is still cantankerous and religious, though he is Catholic, which affects the form his religion takes, and he still loves Jorge/Hareton.

The degradation of Ricardo is fully presented, with his drinking and gambling, and his degradation is expanded in his begging Eduardo and Alejandro for money.

Isabel's deterioration is similarly expanded upon, with her desire for revenge, her slatternly appearance, and her drinking.

Alejandro is suitably brutal and savage, as in his beating and kicking Ricardo. Brontë's characterization of Heathcliff fits in with Buñuel's emphasis on Alejandro's being driven by instinct.

Element from the novel kept in a different form:

Jose (not Nelly) protects Jorge from his father by hiding him, and it is he who removes bullets from the gun.

Jorge threatens to throw a stone at Isabel, not at Nelly.

Buñuel's juxtaposing everyday actions against the violence and extraordinary:

In the beginning Maria and another servant are involved with food.

Isabel, Catalina, and Maria are in the kitchen folding clothes as they talk; Isabel then begins to sew.

Catalina sleeps with baby clothes she has been knitting on her lap.

Jorge massages his father's head, if reluctantly.

As Alejandro and Catalina walk toward the kitchen to continue their quarrel over Isabella, a man is waxing the grand piano in the background.

Jorge tends the fire, and Isabel is putting out drinks as Hindley and his associates gamble.

Changes from the novel:

Catalina regularly bullies or torments Isabel.

At Catalina's fainting in Alejandro's arms, Eduardo stands with a gun in his hand; a close-up of the gun in his hand implies his indecision about whether to go after Alejandro or to take care of Catalina.

The crucifixes on the walls express Buñuel's Catholic background.

Alejandro does not care about her pregnancy and urges her to leave the child with Eduardo and run off with him.