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ÉL

Among the strangest and most perturbing films of his overlooked Mexican period, *Él* is Luis Buñuel's incisive portrait of paranoia, jealousy, and sexual obsession—a nightmarish tale of love gone wrong that prefigures the major themes of his 1960s and '70s work. Incorporating his personal demons into an adaptation of Mercedes Pinto's autobiographical novel, Buñuel tells the story of Francisco Galván de Montemayor (Arturo de Córdova), a devout middle-aged bachelor who falls into amour fou with Gloria (Delia Garcés). After breaking her engagement with another man, Gloria realizes something is terribly off about Francisco, whose sophisticated facade masks deep insecurities and an explosive, violent temper. Descending into madness, Francisco drives Gloria to fear for her life—with no refuge offered by either her family or the church. One of Buñuel's rawest, angriest indictments of religious and social hypocrisy, *Él* stands as the surrealist master's great excursion into dark melodrama, where civilization can find no answer to the raging urges of the irrational id.

This 4K restoration was scanned from a dupe positive preserved by Películas y Vídeos Internacionales at the Filmoteca de la UNAM. Color grading was supervised by Gabriel Figueroa Flores. The restoration work was completed at L'Imagine Ritrovata in 2022. The Film Foundation extends special thanks to Guillermo del Toro and Daniela Michel.

Mexico | 1953 | 93 minutes | Black & White | In Spanish with English subtitles | 1.37:1 aspect ratio

PRODUCTION HISTORY

After making films in France and Spain, surrealist provocateur Luis Buñuel moved to Mexico in 1946. He had been producing work there for several years as a director for hire when he shot his biggest feature to date, *Robinson Crusoe*, in 1952 (though the film wasn't released until 1954). After *Crusoe* wrapped, producer Óscar Dancigers—a Russian expat who had worked with Buñuel on several titles in the forties and fifties—felt the urgent need to get another film up and running now that a looming strike threatened to bring the industry to a standstill. Among Dancigers's proposed projects was an adaptation of Mercedes Pinto's novel *Pensamientos* (*Reflections*), based on the writer's terrifying experiences with her possessive husband. The subject matter spoke to Buñuel's own life. His sister Conchita was married to one Pedro García de Orcasitas, a man whose jealousy and hair-trigger temper had descended into full-blown paranoia. According to Buñuel biographer John Baxter, "on one occasion, [de Orcasitas] imagined he saw Buñuel on the street [in Madrid], poking faces and making 'evil eye' gestures. When he went home to get his gun, his family were able to convince him that Luis was in Zaragoza."

But Buñuel harbored his own mad desire for control over his loved ones. His wife, Jeanne Rucar, once called him "a jealous macho." She explained: "His wife must be a kind of child bride who wouldn't grow up . . . He decided everything: where to live, the time to eat, where we would go out, the education of our sons, my relationships, my friends." Jaime Fernández, who acted in Buñuel's *Crusoe*, observed the same phenomenon: "He always said he didn't understand machismo, as the word is understood in Mexico, but deep down he had many of its characteristics. He was very jealous, for example. Very possessive." Baxter reports that when Jeanne became pregnant, Luis pressured her into an abortion, fearing the child would be a girl. (The Buñuels already had two sons.) Afterward, Luis confessed his troubling rationale: "I would have liked to have a daughter, but with a father so jealous, she would have ended as a prostitute or a nun." In another incident, Luis became ferociously angry when Jeanne spent time alone with Gustavo Pittaluga, the composer for Buñuel's *Los olvidados* (1950) and *Ascent to Heaven* (1952). Buñuel had grown increasingly suspicious of their friendship; after accusing Jeanne of an affair, Luis grabbed a gun and threatened Pittaluga. He and Jeanne somehow managed to calm Luis, but the composer refused to work with Buñuel for over a decade.

To bring the protagonist of *Pensamientos* to life, and to portray the disturbing dimensions of Buñuel's own personality, Dancigers cast Mexican actor Arturo de Córdova as Francisco Galván de Montemayor, the mononymic *Él* (Him) of the film's title. Córdova had sought fame in Hollywood during the forties, and his dashing good looks and natural charisma landed him leading romantic roles in films like *Frenchman's Creek* (1944) and *Incendiary Blonde* (1945). But he was really a stop-gap—an exotic-seeming substitute for the American superstars who were occupied by the war effort—and when World War II came to a close, Córdova found his stateside opportunities limited and returned to Mexico. Córdova was paired with Delia Garcés, who had played a prominent role in the golden age of cinema in her native Argentina. As Gloria, Francisco's terrorized wife, Garcés's natural gentility and compassion convince audiences to sympathize with a woman whose cries for help against her husband's increasingly demented rages are ignored by her priest and even by her own mother.



CAST

Francisco Galván de Montemayor	Arturo de Córdova
Gloria Vilalta	Delia Garcés
Doña Esperanza Vilalta	Aurora Walker
Padre Velasco	Carlos Martínez Baena
Raúl Conde	Luis Beristáin

CREDITS

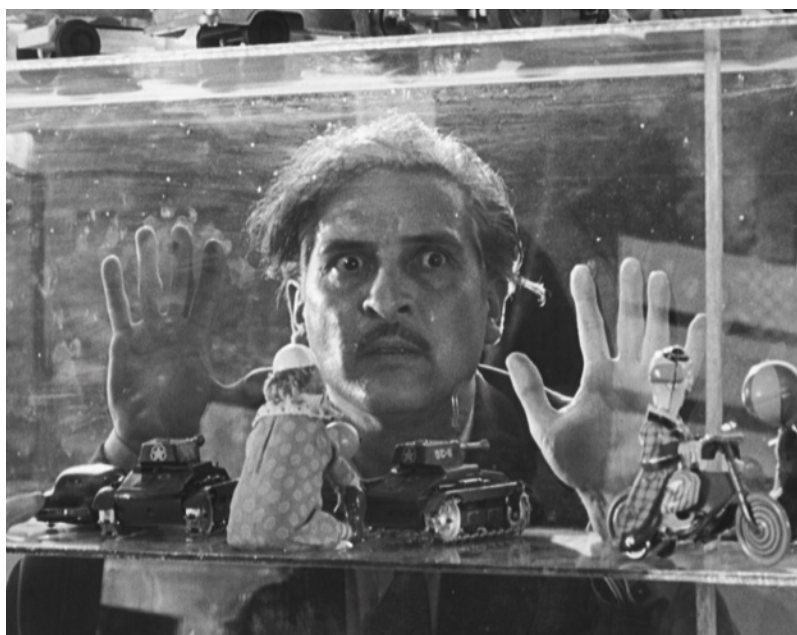
Directed by	Luis Buñuel
Written by	Luis Buñuel Luis Alcoriza
Based on a novel by	Mercedes Pinto
Producer	Óscar Dancigers
Original music by	Luis Hernández Bretón
Cinematographer	Gabriel Figueroa
Editor	Carlos Savage

Él was primarily shot in Estudios Tepeyac in Mexico City, where Buñuel's crew constructed the opulent yet suffocating interiors of Francisco's mansion. "The sets are in a style I like because my father . . . built a house in the style of 1900, a bit art nouveau. I love that period," Buñuel told interviewers José de la Colina and Tomás Pérez Turrent in the midseventies. "I filmed very few exteriors. The objects have importance. Francisco calls his butler and says: 'Straighten that painting, it's crooked.' A crooked painting on the wall or a book that sticks out in the bookshelf bothers me." While Francisco's (and Buñuel's) penchant for order comes through in his relationship to home—his fortress of solitude—his penchant for disorder emerges in the church where he devoutly worships. These scenes were filmed in the Coyoacán district, at the Parroquia San Juan Bautista—a fitting setting for several Buñuelian attacks against Catholic hypocrisy and repression: it is in this church where Francisco first lusts after Gloria (starting with her feet) and where his paranoid delusions grow most acute (he hallucinates the priest, altar boy, and entire congregation jeering at him). By the end, he has spent years in a monastery, allegedly regaining his sanity—though the last shot of Francisco (with Buñuel himself standing in for Córdova) shows him walking away in an ominously demented zigzag.

Buñuel and Córdova viewed the character of Francisco differently—warring interpretations that would impact not only the film but also its reception. Córdova believed that Francisco's psychosis might stem from repressed homosexuality, citing to Buñuel a scene in which the middle-aged aristocrat pays a visit to his butler while the latter is in bed. Buñuel, who spurned this reading, attempted to temper the scene's eroticism by positioning a deflated bicycle tire near the butler's bed, to symbolize a docile libido. Unfortunately, these touches sent Mexican audiences into hysterics. During a preview screening for *Él*, there were already warning signs that its intended tone would be misconstrued: instead of reacting with horror, viewers laughed at the sight of Francisco threatening to sew up Gloria's genitals—a Sadean

image that Buñuel lifted straight from his own dreams. Perhaps fittingly for a film about a paranoid, everything seemed to conspire against *Él*. The movie screened at the 1953 Cannes Film Festival on a day intended to honor war veterans, who, Buñuel claimed in his autobiography, were outraged at what they perceived as a disrespectfully conflicting showtime. Then, just after the film was released in Mexico on July 9, 1953, the long-gestating industry strike went into effect.

Buñuel initially dismissed *Él* as a product of assembly-line filmmaking. Years later, however, both Buñuel and his critics reappraised it as one of his strongest Mexican films—one that made manifest the latent ideas of early surrealist titles like *L'âge d'or* (1930), and that foreshadowed the disturbed, frustrated masculine sexuality of *Rehearsal for a Crime* (1955), *Viridiana* (1961), *Diary of a Chambermaid* (1964), *Tristana* (1970), and *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977). In due course, Buñuel not only praised the film's psychological acuity—he would brag that French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan regularly screened it as a textbook example of paranoid psychosis—but also owned up to its self-portraiture: "It may be the film I put the most of myself into. There is something of me in the protagonist." He went so far as to blame its disastrous theatrical run on an industry that coddles its audiences: *Él* "is one of my favorites," he told *Nuevo Cine*. "I like it particularly because it is a true documentary on a pathological case. But all the minute, detailed, documented exposition of the psychopathic progress of the character is improbable in the eyes of the ordinary public, who generally laugh during the screening of the film. This confirms my feeling that the traditional commercial cinema has cultivated a great fondness in the public for the conventional, the superficial, the false commonplaces of sentiment." Here the legendary director wasn't being at all paranoid: the public of his time had missed out on *Él*'s extraordinary depiction of the beast within civilized man, a portrayal made all the more powerful by eschewing surrealist dream logic in favor of harsh, unflinching realism. Today's audiences can, perhaps, remedy this oversight. ●



LUIS BUÑUEL BIOGRAPHY

Luis Buñuel was born Luis Buñuel Portolés on February 22, 1900, in Calanda, a small town in the Aragon region of Spain. Buñuel's parents married when his father, Leonardo, was forty-three and his mother, María Portolés Cerezuela, was eighteen—a May-December pairing that would influence the romantic and sexual dynamics of Buñuel's films. Luis was the first of seven children.

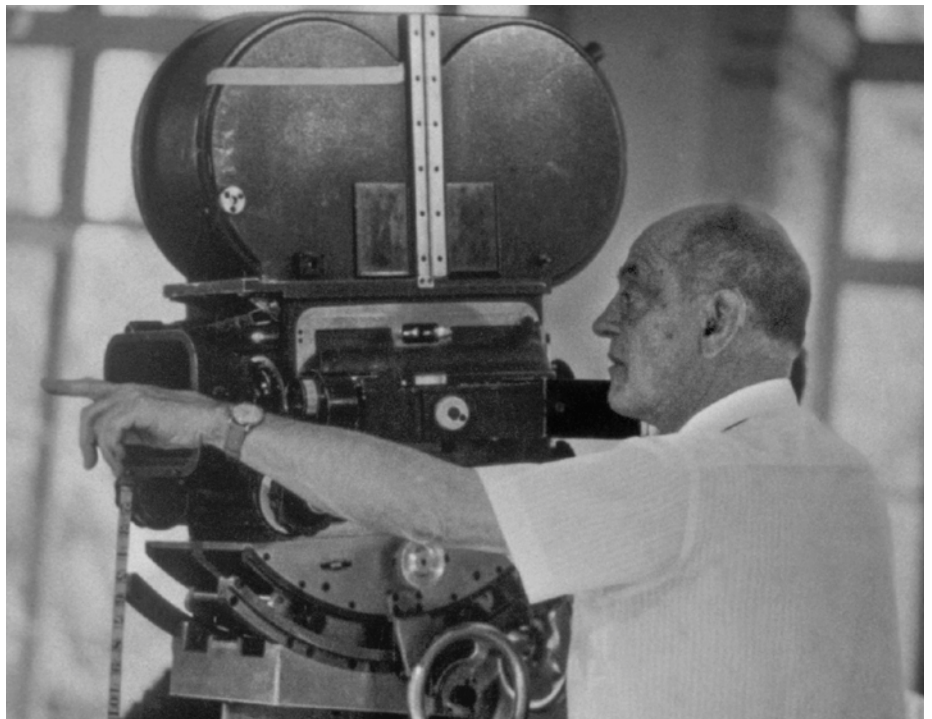
When Luis was still in infancy, the Buñuels moved to Zaragoza. At the age of seven, he enrolled in the Jesuit-run Colegio del Salvador; his final two years of education took place in a public high school, from which he graduated at the age of sixteen. During this time, Buñuel often played the part of the burgeoning director by presiding over magic-lantern productions for his friends. His early adherence to Catholicism ended during adolescence, when Luis became disillusioned by religious superstition and hypocrisy.

In 1917, Buñuel began attending the University of Madrid, where he studied philosophy. During this time, he befriended Salvador Dalí, Federico García Lorca, and other artists living in the Residencia de Estudiantes. The three became core members of La Generación del 27, a Spanish avant-garde movement.

In 1925, Buñuel moved to Paris, where he frequented theaters and cinemas. He studied at Jean Epstein's private film school and was soon assistant directing on Epstein's *Mauprat* (1926) and *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928), though he fell out with Epstein after rejecting the filmmaker's demand that he assist Abel Gance on *Napoléon*. Film-critic positions followed at *La gaceta literaria* and *Les cahiers d'art*, and Buñuel and Dalí began to engage in friendly, essayistic debates about art and culture.

In March 1928, Buñuel and Dalí codirected *Un chien andalou*, which was released in France more than a year later. The film was an instant classic of anarchic surrealism, a short fever dream of disturbing imagery and narrative illogic that was beloved by the very bourgeois audiences that Buñuel and Dalí had meant to shock. It also brought Buñuel and Dalí to the notice of cinema owners and financiers Charles and Marie-Laure de Noailles, who commissioned a new work from the duo. This became the notorious *L'âge d'or* (1930), another surrealist attack on authority, religion, bourgeois propriety, and sexual decency. Buñuel and Dalí cowrote the script but quarreled during production, leaving Buñuel to direct on his own. The two disagreed vehemently over politics, with Buñuel's leftism clashing with Dalí's admiration for Spanish dictator Francisco Franco. (Before their break, Dalí starred in Buñuel's short 1930 documentary *Eating Sea Urchins*.) The anti-Catholic imagery in *L'âge d'or* aroused the ire of fascist groups, and the Parisian police banned the film. When the Vatican threatened them with excommunication, the Noailles (both Catholics) withdrew all prints of the film from commercial circulation, beginning in 1934. For more than four decades, the film was exhibited only rarely and under clandestine conditions.

Hollywood, however, came calling in the wake of the scandal. Buñuel's contract with MGM merely required that he develop technical knowledge of the filmmaking process, but the young director quickly soured on Tinseltown pomposity and didn't contribute much to the studio. In 1931, he returned to Spain, which was entering one of its most turbulent eras. That



same year, Buñuel joined the Communist Party, following through on his increasing interest in political and social causes. For his first film in his native country, *Land Without Bread* (1933), he documented poor rural peasants. He also continued to employ his trademark irreverence by mocking the conventional travelogue genre, with the film's impassive narrator delivering incongruous, "objective" commentary over scenes of wretched destitution. Unsurprisingly, both the Second Spanish Republic and the subsequent Franco regime banned *Land Without Bread*.

In 1933, Buñuel went to Paris to work in Paramount Pictures' dubbing department. But after marrying former Olympic gymnast Jeanne Rucar in 1934, he returned to Madrid, where he found a similar role with Warner Brothers. When the Spanish production company Filmófono offered him the chance to produce and direct commercial films, Buñuel accepted—he would use the opportunity to infuse Spanish filmmaking with the technical know-how he had picked up in France and the United States. Buñuel stipulated, however, that he remain uncredited for his Filmófono work, refusing to sully his surrealist reputation. He produced eighteen films during his time there and allegedly directed four.

Buñuel spent the Spanish Civil War working for the Republican government. During official excursions to Geneva and Paris in the late thirties, he cataloged and approved Republican propaganda films, transported leftist writings to Spain, and oversaw the production of *España 1936*, a documentary about the country's political turmoil. In 1938, the Noailles again helped Buñuel by funding his trip to the United States, where he provided technical advice on depictions of the Spanish Civil War in Hollywood productions. But the war ended in Republican defeat; instead of returning to his fascist-controlled homeland, Buñuel and his family remained in the U.S.

After the director floundered once more in Hollywood, he sought work on the East Coast. In New York City, the Museum of Modern Art's chief film curator Iris Barry asked Buñuel to educate U.S. government officials on the power of cinematic propaganda. As part of this project, Buñuel reedited Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935) to include footage from Hans Bertram's *Feuertaufe* (1940), a Nazi-sanctioned document about the invasion of Poland. He continued to work at MoMA through the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (OCIAA), a U.S. agency that produced anti-fascist propaganda for Latin American distribution. Buñuel resigned from MoMA when his department's budget was slashed and, in 1944, made his third sojourn to Hollywood as a Spanish-dubbing producer for Warner Bros. Until the end of his contract there, Buñuel developed several screenplays—one of which, *La novia de medianoche*, was made into a film in 1997, fourteen years after his death.

In 1946, Buñuel teamed up with Óscar Dancigers, a Russian independent producer then working in Mexico City, for the musical *Gran Casino* (1947), a box-office bomb that undermined Buñuel's attempt to gain a foothold in the nation's growing film industry. The director took some time to find a project that might restore his reputation—this turned out to be *The Great Madcap* (1949), a successful comedy. For the next sixteen years, Buñuel would direct more than a dozen films in Mexico or as part of Mexican coproductions, and though some were undertaken as director-for-hire gigs, others stand among the slickest, most subversive titles of his career: *Los olvidados* (1950), *Él* (1953), *Rehearsal for a Crime* (1955), *Nazarín* (1959), *The Exterminating Angel* (1962), and *Simon of the Desert* (1965). Buñuel not only refined his directorial technique but also mastered a wide range of tones and genres (social realism in *Los olvidados*, nightmarish melodrama in *Él*, dark comedy in *Rehearsal for a Crime*, deadpan surrealism in *The Exterminating Angel*, religious satire in *Simon of the Desert*) that would prove essential to crafting his signature auteurist work in the late sixties and seventies.



During this period, Buñuel also directed his first color and his first English-language film (1954's *Robinson Crusoe*, for which he also shot a version in Spanish); returned to France to helm *This Is Called Dawn*, *Death in the Garden* (both 1956), and *Fever Mounts at El Pao* (1959); and won the Palme d'Or at the 1961 Cannes Film Festival for *Viridiana*, the official entry for Spain. *Viridiana* would turn out to be his most controversial title since *L'âge d'or*: the delirious, taboo-busting tale of an aspiring nun's moral and sexual corruption had somehow been approved by Spanish censors—the few scenes with demanded changes were revised to be even more scandalous—but upon its release, it was condemned by the Holy See and banned by the Franco government.

Viridiana thrust Buñuel into the international spotlight, giving him the cachet to direct even bolder projects. In the aristocracy-skewering *The Exterminating Angel*, a crew of moneyed guests are prevented from leaving a dinner party and consequently descend into barbarity; in the French production *Diary of a Chambermaid* (1964), Octave Mirbeau's novel is adapted to include strong antifascist elements. *Belle de jour* (1967)—another literary adaptation, in which a bourgeois housewife works as a courtesan behind her husband's back—won the Golden Lion at the Venice International Film Festival.

Buñuel's sixties work coincided with the increasingly radical experiments and pointed critiques of European art cinema. *The Milky Way* (1969) marked the most audacious effort of his career up to that point: a loosely connected series of bizarre and outright heretical episodes concerning Christian mythology and doctrine, the film combines modern attitudes, historical figures, and fantastic leaps of logic to mock the contradictions at the heart of religious devotion. It was the third of six scripts—along with *Diary of a Chambermaid*, *Belle de jour*, *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, *The Phantom of Liberty*, and *That Obscure Object of Desire*—that Buñuel wrote with Jean-Claude Carrière, arguably his most important collaborator.

Buñuel returned to Spain with *Tristana* (1970), a dysfunctional romance between an aging man and a young woman, which earned an Academy Award nomination for Best Foreign-Language Film. With *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972), he won that same award, this time for France. In that picture, which inverts the premise of *The Exterminating Angel*, a group of wealthy friends attempt to dine together but are repeatedly frustrated—a subject paralleled by the film's form, which verges into narrative-delaying tangents and long, eerie dream sequences. Digression infuses the entire structure of *The Phantom of Liberty* (1974), a picaresque film of bizarre, absurdist sketches that flow into one another sans consistent plot or characters. *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977), Buñuel's final feature, also plays with structure by having two actresses portray the same young woman, who exploits an older man's sexual obsession.

Post-*Desire*, Buñuel retired from filmmaking. In 1983, he published his celebrated autobiography, *My Last Sigh* (*Mon dernier soupir*). He died that same year, in Mexico City, from complications of diabetes. To this day he is considered one of cinema's most imaginative and subversive voices. ●

LUIS BUÑUEL FILMOGRAPHY

- 1929 *Un chien andalou* (*An Andalusian Dog*) (short)
- 1930 *L'âge d'or* (*The Golden Age*)
Eating Sea Urchins (*Menjant garotes*) (short)
- 1933 *Land Without Bread* (*Las Hurdes: Tierra sin pan*) (short)
- 1940 *The History of the Vatican* (*El Vaticano de Pío XII*) (short)
- 1947 *Gran Casino*
- 1949 *The Great Madcap* (*El gran calavera*)
- 1950 *Los olvidados*
- 1951 *Susana*
The Daughter of Deceit (*La hija del engaño*)
- 1952 *Ascent to Heaven*, a.k.a. *Mexican Bus Ride* (*Subida al cielo*)
A Woman Without Love (*Una mujer sin amor*)
- 1953 *The Brute* (*El bruto*)
Él, a.k.a. *This Strange Passion*
- 1954 *Illusion Travels by Streetcar* (*La ilusión viaja en tranvía*)
Wuthering Heights (*Abismos de pasión*)
Robinson Crusoe
- 1955 *The River and Death* (*El río y la muerte*)
Rehearsal for a Crime, a.k.a. *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz* (*Ensayo de un crimen*)
- 1956 *This Is Called Dawn* (*Cela s'appelle l'aurore*)
Death in the Garden (*La mort en ce jardin*)
- 1959 *Nazarín*
Fever Mounts at El Pao, a.k.a. *Republic of Sin* (*La fièvre monte à El Pao*)
- 1960 *The Young One* (*La joven*)
- 1961 *Viridiana*
- 1962 *The Exterminating Angel* (*El ángel exterminador*)
- 1964 *Diary of a Chambermaid* (*Le journal d'une femme de chambre*)
- 1965 *Simon of the Desert* (*Simón del desierto*) (short)
- 1967 *Belle de jour*
- 1969 *The Milky Way* (*La voie lactée*)
- 1970 *Tristana*
- 1972 *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (*Le charme discret de la bourgeoisie*)
- 1974 *The Phantom of Liberty* (*Le fantôme de la liberté*)
- 1977 *That Obscure Object of Desire* (*Cet obscur objet du désir*)