



Él (literally *He* or *Him*; U.S. title: *This Strange Passion*) is a 1953 Mexican melodrama directed by the Spaniard Luis Buñuel. Below is Kino Ken's review of the Criterion Collection dvd release of that film.

17 of a possible 20 points = ****1/2 = a minor classic

Mexico 1953 black-and-white 82 minutes subtitled live action fantasy drama Producciones Tepeyac Producer: Óscar Dancigers

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

Points:

- 2 Direction: Luis Buñuel*
- 1 Editing: Carlos Savage
- 2 Cinematography: Gabriel Figueroa*
- 2 Lighting
- 1 Screenplay: Luis Buñuel and Luis Alcoriza, adapted from the novel
Pensamientos (Thoughts) by Mercedes Pinto
- 2 Music: Luis Hernández Bretón
- 2 Production Design: Edward Fitzgerald*
Set Decoration: Pablo Galván*
Set Dressing: Pablo Galván*
Gowns: Henri de Chatillon*
Makeup: Armando Meyer
- 2 Sound Direction: Jesús González Gancy*

Dialogue Recording: José de Pérez*

2 Acting

1 Creativity

17 total points

Cast: Arturo de Córdova* (Francisco Galván de Montemayor), Delia Garcés* (Gloria Vilalta), Aurora Walker (Doña Esperanza Vilalta), Carlos Martínez Baena* (Padre Velasco), Manuel Dondé (Pablo), Rafael Banquells (Ricardo Luján), Fernando Casanova (Lawyer Beltrán), José Pidal (Padre prior), Roberto Meyer (lawyer), Luis Beristáin (Raúl Conde), Leon Barroso (waiter), Georgina González (Lupe), Polo Ramos (Padre Alonso), Ana María Villaseñor (Marta), others

Certainly one of Spanish director Luis Buñuel's finest films, *Él (He or Him)* is a melodramatic study of progressive paranoia. Arturo de Córdova stars as Francisco Galván de Montemayor, a once-wealthy Mexican businessman pursuing simultaneously a lawsuit to recover ancestral property and an engaged woman named Gloria Vilalta.

Opening scenes of the film reveal his obsessive possessiveness, thinly cloaked behind orthodox Catholicism. Francisco is plainly a foot fetishist and obtrusive stalker. Though Gloria is pledged to marry Francisco's friend, engineer Raúl Conde, the monomaniac determines to woo her himself. He cares nothing about either loyalty or friendship. Like a single-minded collector, Francisco will pursue the desired object persistently until he obtains it.

At first reluctantly refusing to accommodate the stranger's requests in a church setting for her name and address, Gloria is eventually brought to Francisco's castle-fronted domicile by Raúl, who foolishly believes his pal's amorous intentions are directed towards his fiancée's mother. After dinner, Francisco and Gloria become more intimate, the woman plainly finding a degree of fascination in the man's determined courtship.

She's also relishing power her beauty provides over men she encounters. This trait is revealed again later when an acquaintance first met on a flight to Mexico from Argentina happens to cross the path of honeymooning Gloria and Francisco in Guanajuato, birthplace of the latter. Though supposedly sightseeing, Gloria is required nonetheless to snap photos of her husband (Cathedral Basilica of Our Lady of the Light). Initially, Francisco explains he'll

pose for one shot and then they will reverse places. Instead, he demands she take a second one of him, then reneges on his promise to photograph her. Up in a bell tower of the same structure, the bossy Guanajuato identifies people strolling below as “worms” and expresses in question form a murderous wish to throw his spouse down to pavement below.

Clearly a madman. Yet Gloria, though shaken, probably feels bound by Catholic aversion to divorce. She sympathizes, at her continuing peril, with Francisco’s predicament of trying to enjoy female companionship and at the same time deny it to every other male who happens to encounter her.

Later on, in their hotel room, Francisco is certain the male in a bordering room, Ricardo Luján, is using a keyhole to spy on the newlyweds. He seizes a sewing needle and thrusts it through the aperture. Then claims the voyeur must have moved aside just in time to escape harm. Still dissatisfied, the jealous lunatic storms next door, commands the inhabitant of the room to come out, then when he does, accuses the man of spying on himself and his mate. That leads to his own debacle since Ricardo, who’s been trying to initiate nothing more than friendly conversation with a former fellow passenger on a flight, decides he’s had enough of Francisco’s hostility and knocks him to the floor.

From that point on, the shamed patrician directs his aggressiveness overwhelmingly to passive Gloria. When she seeks advice from her mother and Padre Velasco, they tell her simply to live with the situation and quit being so flirtatious with male companions.

Meanwhile, Francisco hires a new lawyer to prosecute his property case. He tells Gloria to welcome and entertain that individual, then punishes her for doing so. Both physically and psychologically.

Gloria recounts these episodes of uncontrolled jealousy to Raül when he drives past her on a street not too far from the Montemayor residence. She is in the process of running away from an increasingly brutal home situation. He advises divorce as the only practical solution. One she rejects.

A real glutton for punching dummy duty, Gloria returns to Francisco’s place. He seems penitent, begs forgiveness. Calm ensues for a while.

But when Francisco hears from his second lawyer the lawsuit he’s pushing will ultimately be decided against him, he takes out his frustration on his housemate, accusing her of being in league with the attorney to defraud him.

To end her “infidelity” once and for all, Francisco resolves to perform an enforced colpocleisis on Gloria. Like all his assault strategies, it fails. Leaving him even more despondent than before.

Returning to his final refuge in a frequently attended church, the delusional double loser fastens on a notion everyone, even long-time defender Padre Velasco, is laughing at his cuckoldry. Surrendering to hysteria, he attacks the priest in the middle of a mass, requiring five men to pull him off his prospective victim.

Wait. There’s an epilogue!

Francisco has become a monk. Gloria’s now mother to a junior Francisco and wedded to Raúl. That trio cautiously pays a visit to the monastery where Francisco now resides. Unknown to them, their presence is spotted by a hooded figure who later confides to his fatherly host the family grouping they observed proved he wasn’t insane after all.

With Gabriel Figueroa serving up masterful Expressionist cinematography and composer Luis Hernández Bretón building successively greater waves of suspense with a Hermannesque score, *Él* envelops audiences in an increasingly suffocating atmosphere. Much of its horror is calmly narrated by the very victim of an unraveling paranoid’s persecutions. Action, especially in the film’s second half, unfolds in a home far too grandiose and eccentrically designed to serve as a comfortable dwelling place for anyone. Designed in whimsical confusion of styles by Francisco’s father, it houses maids, a fastidious but financially straitened owner, and a skirt-chasing valet. The edifice has an exterior façade resembling a medieval castle, entranceway windows with wild, curlicue designs, a grand stairway which splits into two opposite curves halfway to the second floor. It’s overstuffed with furniture scattered about in no particular order. Spare rooms are crammed with neglected junk, giving the house a distinctively late period Hearst Castle ambience. Edward Fitzgerald and Pablo Galván can be commended for creating those oppressively bizarre decors.

Arturo de Córdova thoroughly immersed himself in the paranoia of his character, alternately masquerading as level-headed patrician and insanely jealous sadomasochist. Clothes and hair become increasingly disheveled as he descended ever further into self-racking suspicions of a massive conspiracy united against him.

Delia Garcés, who actually did hail from Argentina like her film character, wisely underplayed her role, making a fine polar opposite foil for the often hyperdramatic excesses of her screen husband. Projecting a charming combination of vulnerability, wifely submissiveness, controlled coquetry, and reserved intelligence, she perfectly fit requirements of her Gloria Vilalta character.

Another remarkable performance in *Él* comes from Carlos Martínez Baena in the comic relief role of Padre Velasco. He displays precisely the amount of naïveté and confusion inherent to the priest, an amiably smug preserver of Mexico's socio-religious status quo, someone more concerned with eating well than mediating marital strife.

Sound recording captures with utmost fidelity construction noises, distraught screams of an abused wife, scufflings of parishioners attempting to separate murderous Francisco from Padre Velasco, and footfalls on flagstones inside a church. In two places there are sudden sound dropouts even in this restoration. However, they are minor nuisances.

Except for one interior bedroom night scene and what appears to be found documentary footage of dam construction, lighting is excellent. There are plenty of chiaroscuro effects contrasting darkness imposing itself on Francisco increasingly in proportion to money and sanity diminishing with radiance of Gloria's face throughout her travails.

Editing is rather awkwardly fitful in the daymare scene where Francisco's mind switches back and forth between the reality inside his church and a phantasmagoria where everyone present, even an altar boy, mocks him. No doubt Buñuel intended that to indicate the mental battle between reality and delusion occurring in his main character's mind at that point. Unfortunately, it's perceived aesthetically more as flaw than asset.

Due to extremely mature themes and all-too-authentic depiction of a deteriorating mind, *Él* is only suitable viewing for adult audiences. For them, it's a sensually evocative trip into machinations of a decaying psyche, as well as a graphic depiction of cruelty inflicted on women trapped by conservative social constraints in one-sided partnerships with vindictively irrational, aggressive males.

Bonus features of this Criterion Collection dvd release are as follows:

1. a one minute, twenty-five seconds theatrical trailer

- 2. an essay on the film and its relationship to Mercedes Pinto's autobiographical source book by critic Fernanda Solórzano**
- 3. an hour-long panel discussion on Spanish tv titled "Film in Black and White" moderated by director José Luis Garci about Buñuel, Hollywood, Hitchcock, the connection between *Él's* bell tower scene and a similar one in *Vertigo*, the Spanish love of cruelty, and various memorable scenes in Buñuel's French, Mexican, and Spanish films**
- 4. a thirty minute, twenty-two second 1981 interview of Luis Buñuel by Jean-Claude Carrière, who wrote numerous screenplays for the director's French films, filled with revealing anecdotes about Luis's personal and social life**
- 5. a twenty-two minute, thirty-four second video essay by Jordi Xifra titled "Buñuel from E to L" focusing on such subjects as the roles played in the Spaniard's films by insects, kinesis, foot fetishes, etc.**
- 6. a twenty-nine and one-half minute "Appreciation" of Buñuel by director Guillermo del Toro emphasizing the influence he had on future directors and contemporaries, as well as the fairly symbiotic relationship between Luis and Alfred Hitchcock**