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El

El inaugurates the third line of Buñuel's Mexican career, which follows the complicated tormented loves of those neurotics who best crystallise the confusions of the *haute bourgeoisie*.

Francisco (Arturo de Cordova) is a man of property, handsome, devout, unmarried at forty, and still virgin: a paragon of his creed. He lives alone with his servants, in an Art Nouveau villa whose ornate flowings suggest less the organic than the slowly capsizing. He is a man of principle: he dismisses his lawyer for insufficient severity in prosecuting some tenants, and when he catches his manservant kissing the maid, he dismisses the maid, lust is unnatural in women, and woman, like Eve, is the troublemaker. He also believes in romantic love. The reverse side of his misogyny erupts while he is in church. Catching a glimpse of a beautiful foot, and its beautiful owner, he redoubles his visits to all the churches in the city to try and find her. When he finds his Gloria, he woos and wins her from her architect lover, who has no defence against Francisco's suave assurance. But, as in the tradition of courtly love, consummation poses more troubles than distant adoration. The wedding-night in a sleeping-

car is a tormented one. Francisco's imagination projects his repressed promiscuity into Gloria, and his repressed potency into her friends. He swings to and fro between insane jealousy and pleas for forgiveness. One night, he enters her bedroom, where she lies sleeping, armed with the following instruments: a

Still: Arturo de Cordova in El. Francisco, the idealist, takes censorship to its logical conclusion. He arrives in his wife's bedroom suitably equipped.

length of stout rope, cotton wool, disinfectant, scissors, and needle and thread. When she wakes, and flees in terror, his smooth lies to her mother and her priest seem to put her in the wrong. At length, however, he runs amok. He imagines that priest and congregation are mocking him as a cuckold, and tries to strangle the priest.

Finally, he seems to have found peace in a monastery, where he is visited by Gloria, her son, and her husband. He assures her he is perfectly happy now, and walks away from her, in his monk's habit, zigzagging eerily from one



side of the path to the other.

This film is far from being merely an exemplary destruction of a neurotic bourgeois. Were it just that, it might smack of the gratuitous exercise. But the story can also be told as Francisco's obstinate but losing struggle against his paranoia, which doubtless has a purely personal core, intensified, however, by the literal sincerity with which he lives up to the ethos of his class. Francisco is more than a stray eccentric: his sincerity is a burning-glass concentrating the spiritual rays of his belief on to his life. He is both pillar and prisoner of his society. Both his wife and his property must be absolutely his, stamped, sealed and, all too literally, sewn up, against others, on to whom he projects his own implacable rapacity. Naturally, he resents the necessity of turning aside from his spiritual development to attend to such mundane matters. But even in the sphere of the spirit, the old Adam surges up. In a church, his attention wanders from a cold, purely ceremonial concern for the feet of the poor to a richly erotic foot. In a church again, the sheer delirium of jealousy drives him to a characteristically distorted vision of what is, in a sense, the truth: religion is a derisive sham, the mocking enemy of his real self. And just as he smoothly lied about Gloria to her priest and family, so, in the monastery, his priest lies to him about his family and to his family about him.

A Christian moral might be that the sincere Christian will destroy himself if he doesn't cut radically free from the self-righteousness of his society and follow the example of Christ. And what happens then? Buñuel offers an answer, many years later, in *Nazarin*. The tone of *El* is flat and arid, the visuals scarcely betraying the discrepancies of lies and truth, logic and insanity, that exist insidiously in the dialogue, in nuances of expression and faintly indicated moods.