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## FILM

## Passion Pit

By J. Hoberman

**WUTHERING HEIGHTS.** Directed by Luis Buñuel. Written by Buñuel, Arduino Maiuri, and Julio Alejandro de Castro from the novel by Emily Brönte. Produced by Oscar Dancigers. Released by Plexus Films. At the Public Theater.

A blatant hacienda melodrama that camps out on poverty row before blasting triumphantly into the stratosphere, Luis Buñuel's 1953 adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* is among the few great movies taken from a classic work of literature.

The film is among the most extraordinary of Buñuel's still undervalued Mexican period and there's a certain appositeness to its finally opening in New York (at the Public Theater) the same week as the much-heralded reissue of Alfred Hitchcock's official masterpiece *Vertigo*. Hitchcock and Buñuel are the two great Freudians of narrative cinema and their films have numerous points of contact including, in this case, the delirious celebration of what the French surrealists called *l'amour fou*.

In theory at least, the surrealists took romantic love to the end of the line. *L'amour fou*—at once pure instinct and the great refusal of life as it is—was their term for the passion that obliterates all convention in its drive for the object of its desire. This crazy love implies a dialectic that can only end in the graveyard and, because the surrealists (like Freud) refused to believe in God, it was necessarily political.

Among other things, the surrealists anticipated many programs of the late counterculture and—no less than the Diggers, Weathermen, or *Bonnie and Clyde* fans of the 1960s—the entre-guerre cronies of André Breton saw love as a revolutionary force. "It is Love which brings about the transition from pessimism to action," the group wrote in their collective defense of *L'Age d'Or* after that Luis Buñuel-Salvador Dalí collaboration provoked a bloody riot at its 1930 Paris premiere. "Love demands the sacrifice of every other value: status, family, honor. And the failure of Love within the social framework leads to Revolt."

No one who sees *L'Age d'Or* can miss the significance of the scene in which two fully clothed lovers, embracing in the mud, are pulled apart by an irate crowd—nothing less than the New Rome is built upon their separation. Indeed, if *L'Age d'Or* can be said to have a plot, it is precisely the increasingly convoluted and never truly successful attempt of this sundered couple to get back into each other's arms and reannihilate the world.

"For me," Buñuel wrote in his memoirs, *L'Age d'Or* "was a film about passion, *l'amour fou*, the irresistible force that thrusts two people together and about the impossibility of their ever becoming one."

Buñuel continued to mine the themes and imagery of *L'Age d'Or* for the rest of his career and, shortly after the initial scandal (which won him a trip to Hollywood), he and several surrealist pals knocked off an adaptation of Emily Brönte's *Wuthering Heights*. The novel was not only a surrealist cult book but a prescient commercial choice (witness the enduring popularity of the 1939 William Wyler version). By some accounts, Buñuel had even envisioned Katharine Hepburn in the role of Catherine. History derailed his ambitions, however, and when the project was finally realized it was under appropriately surreal conditions—made on a shoestring in Mexico with actors he claimed his producer Oscar Dancigers "had hired for a musical."

In his 1951 *Susana*, which had its belated New York premiere last month at the Public, Buñuel rendered a reactionary potboiler radical by outrageously exaggerating every aspect of its hackneyed



Sex tips for ghouls: looking for *l'amour fou* in all the wrong places

femme fatale plot. His *Wuthering Heights* is more an act of radical compression. By focusing the film utterly on the unfulfilled sexual passion of Heathcliff and Catherine, Buñuel bypasses the novel's literary aura and plunges into its true sources in popular ballad and folk tale.

Buñuel's *Wuthering Heights*, which should really be known by its more flavorsome release title *Abismos del Pasión*, is a film every bit as strange as Brönte's ghost-haunted novel. Not only is the plot played for maximum gothic hokum, the Buñuelian taste for disruption and nonsequitur (never more desultorily blunt than in his Mexican flicks) gives this tacky tumult of billowing curtains, bombastic cloudbursts, and trashy, stilted performances, a nervous, unfixed subtext.

Brönte's soulful Catherine is here a petulant gamine. Her fierce and pitiless Heathcliff is coarsened into a cartoon *charro* and a rote symbol of evil. (In one of the film's more hilarious throwaways, living frogs are a flaming sacrifice to his diabolical presence.) In place of Brönte's mystical identification with the wind-swept Yorkshire moors, we have Buñuel's humorously personal zoological garden of natural cruelty, set in a half-blasted landscape of gnarled trees and sunbaked gullies. *Abismos del Pasión* resounds with the music of unmotivated dog barks. Pigs and insects are routinely slaughtered. The virtually autonomous opening image is a slipshod composition of a tree full of vultures.

The male stars—Jorge Mistral (a wooden macho imported from Spain to play the film's Heathcliff equivalent, Alejandro), Ernesto Alonso (the hamstrung Mexican star forced to enact the wimpy, butterfly-collecting Edgardo), and popeyed Luis Aceves Castañeda (the murderous Ricardo) are hardly more than Kabuki glowering machines. Even more deficient, the two women—Irasema Dilian, the Polish-born, babyfaced blonde who plays the headstrong Catalina, and rumba-dancer Lilia Prado, the goody two-shoes Isabella—are all gush and flounce, brandishing corseted breasts as though they were deadly weapons. ("As expected, there were horrendous problems during the shoot," Buñuel remarks drily in his memoirs.) And yet, the ineptitude of these stick figures only serves to heighten the emotions which, as E. M. Forster wrote of Brönte's novel, do not inhabit the characters of Heathcliff, Catherine and Edgar, so

much as "surround them like thunderclouds."

For much of its running time, *Abismos del Pasión* is never less than absurd. An early sequence establishes the married bliss of Catalina and Edgardo, complemented by the whining presence of his sister Isabella, as the land of a 1000 repressions. Like a force of nature, Alejandro blows into this bizarre ménage (he literally crashes through the window), attempting to reclaim Catalina, the childhood sweetheart he hasn't seen in 10 years. Although Catalina declares she loves Alejandro more than the salvation of her soul, the pregnant wife refuses to leave her husband and, in revenge, Alejandro marries Isabella, taking her to live with him and Catalina's dissolute brother Ricardo in the ruined mansion the peasants call *casa del diablo*.

It would take paragraphs to describe the escalating clashes between the five principals, the way—when Catalina and Alejandro confront each other—adoration is switched on as if by the completion of an electric current, the grotesque quality of life at the *casa del diablo*. Suffice to say that, as events come to a head in a film that is no less drenched in Wagner's rapturous "Liebestod" than was *L'Age d'Or*, *Abismos* becomes so convulsive as to be ineffable.

Alejandro arrives to visit the dying Catalina one more time. After she dies, he implores her to haunt him. "Don't leave me alone in this abyss," he cries as the wind whistles through the palm trees. The film's last five minutes are the most sublime passage in the Buñuel oeuvre. The grief-crazed Alejandro scales the cemetery wall, threading his way through the tombs in search of Catalina's sepulchre. Spotting her crypt, he seizes a handy crowbar and, after unsuccessfully trying to snap the chains that protect it, brutally inserts the bar into the lock. (Given the gothic ecstasy of the sequence, the Freudian coarseness of this closeup is a brilliantly jarring touch that not only concretizes Alejandro's thwarted sexual desire but irresistibly brings to mind the early closeup of prissy Edgardo fastidiously sticking a pin through the spine of a captured butterfly.)

At this moment, the music stops and a rifle pokes into the frame to shoot the demon lover dead. But Buñuel will vouchsafe Alejandro a final trip into the underworld. With the Liebestod surging up again, the mortally wounded madman plunges into the crypt, throws open Cata-

lina's coffin and picks up—a handful of dust. Wagner is building toward his climax as Alejandro vainly tries to move Catalina's petrified arm. Finally, he lifts her veil and bends to kiss her. Will they sleep together at last? Behind him, Catalina calls. Alejandro looks back—shrouded in her wedding gown, Catalina beckons to him, then turns into malevolent Ricardo who fires again, blasting Alejandro across the coffin. The killer stalks out and closes the crypt: screaming letters: F-I-N.

Magnificently lurid, incredibly tender. *Abismos*'s ultimate blasphemy perfectly illustrates the irresistible force that thrusts two people together as well as the impossibility of their ever becoming one. You may laugh; I would be ashamed not to cry.