



THE CRIMINAL LIFE OF ARCHIBALDO DE LA CRUZ

Luis Buñuel; Mexico 1955; Second Run; region-free Blu-ray; b&w; Spanish with English subtitles; Certificate 12; 91 minutes; 1.37:1. Extras: video essays by Cristina Álvarez López; video introduction by David Wilt; booklet; BD-Rom script.

REVIEWED BY HENRY K. MILLER

In Buñuel's final film, *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977), the main story, in which a late middle-aged bourgeois is repeatedly encouraged and humiliated by a young woman played at random intervals by two actresses, is punctuated by equally random acts of political violence. It was shot partly in Spain during what is called Spain's 'transition to democracy' after the death of Franco, and surely not every Spaniard was convinced that the transition would succeed. After all, someone like Buñuel, born in 1900, had seen the prevailing order he had grown up under collapse into dictatorship in 1923, 18 months before he left for Paris, and then a second dictatorship, Franco's, after the civil war that led to Buñuel's exile in Mexico.

The mysterious connection between the instability of the liberal political order and the instability of the ego, where, in Raymond Durnat's words, "a Freudian awareness of inner reality meets a Marxist awareness of social reality", has one of its most perfect expressions in the opening reel of *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz* (1955). Inside a bourgeois home in a small town in Mexico, a pampered boy is disciplined by his governess for wearing his mother's clothes; outside, revolutionaries gather in the streets. When young Archibaldo wills her death, it comes via a stray bullet through the window, leaving an eroticised corpse and giving him the illusion that he was responsible. He will not become a revolutionary, but instead a conventional middle-class man – plagued, however, by the frustration that is the lot of Buñuel's bourgeoisie.

Archibaldo's thwarted desire is to kill – again, as he sees it – out of nostalgia, to experience a power he no longer possesses. But, as was the case the first time, his would-be victims, all women, die by other means before he can get to them himself. And, as we might think, his desire to kill women was in the first place a rerouted desire, substituted for another more obscure object. Satisfaction is endlessly deferred, as it must be; as the husband of one of Archibaldo's victim-lovers puts it, anticipating *That Obscure Object of Desire*, "You know how men chase women until they get them?" It could be asked, now that he is less of a household name, whether one needs Freud to appreciate such a Freudian film. On the strength of this, I would say not.

DISC: Buñuel's quickly made Mexican films – this one was shot and released in three months, hot on the heels of the four features he made in 1954 – are sometimes called visually flat, but there is little sign of that in this new 4K restoration. Other extras include three visual essays by Cristina Álvarez López and an extended intro by David Wilt, who sees the film as a prototype for the *giallo* thrillers of the 1970s.