Quixotic Desire and the Avoidance of Closure in Luis Buñuel’s *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz*

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In homage to Luis Buñuel and his comic film noir, *Ensayo de un crimen* (released internationally as *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz*, Mexico, 1955), François Truffaut writes that one of the film’s most remarkable characteristics may be discovered upon leaving the cinema: “If you question the audience at the end [...] almost everybody will tell you that they’ve just seen the story of a likable guy who kills women. It is absolutely not true; Archibaldo has killed no one” (267). Since literary critics usually treat film almost exclusively as a self-contained “text,” the experience that takes place outside the darkened cinema is often regarded as an elusive, nebulous area beyond the realm of literary theory proper. Truffaut’s observation, however, begs the question: How does a film achieve closure with its audience? According to June Schlueter’s work on the endings of theatrical plays, closure is not the same as an ending (in our case, a film’s final frames) because viewers (whether real or implied) consent to closure based on how well the presentation of a story meets their expectations (24). Truffaut’s comment offers a reading of the audience

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1 Barbara Hernstein Smith is considered a pioneer in the study of closure, and she speaks at length about the gratification of the reader’s literary expectations (14).

rather than the film, and in this regard, informal discussion with first-time spectators at Buñuel retrospectives and in the college classroom indeed echoes the audience reaction Truffaut describes. Could it be, however, that the director’s artistic mastery in telling Archibaldo’s fantastical tale of violent sex crimes leads to other, more open-ended interpretations of the story?

Until recently, critical reception of Archibaldo de la Cruz has been reduced to summarizing the plot and offering commentary on its object symbolism, a tendency which ignores the literary merit of the film that in-depth discursive analysis provides. In part, this is due to the predominant perception in the field that the majority of Buñuel’s films produced in Mexico are monolithic and highly conventional. While Peter Evans’s psychoanalytically-informed reading of Archibaldo de la Cruz is truly exceptional, his division of the works from Buñuel’s Mexican period into two classifications—commercial Mexican film and auteurist cinema (36–37)—is representative of a critical bias which equates “Mexican film” with a compromised art form due to overt commercialism. Although Evans elevates Buñuel’s comic film noir to the latter category, such a gesture inadvertently intensifies the suspect distinction between high and low culture, opposing European-styled productions with those meeting the market demands of a Latin American nation. To suggest that Archibaldo de la Cruz is less commercial because it is auteur—that is, more European and therefore more “artistic”—is to obscure the fact that Buñuel’s auteurist pieces were commercially designed for an international (especially French) market, a point Evans concedes (38). In general, subtle cultural prejudice has led to “definitive” readings of the film which do not account for the brilliant narrative construction that produces interpretative anomalies, such as those reflected in Truffaut’s informal poll of French spectators.

The study of narrative structures proves more useful in categorizing films like Archibaldo de la Cruz, a work which, for example, displays an interesting adaptation of the picaresque narrative tradition. In this essay, I apply basic narratological concepts of theorists including Seymour Chatman and Gérard Genette, in order to study the degree

2 In his discussion of auteurist cinema, David Bordwell states, “The consistency of an authorial signature across an oeuvre constitutes an economically exploitable trademark” (211).

3 A notable exception is Paul Sandro’s study of narrative in Buñuel’s Mexican productions, Subida al cielo (Mexican Bus Ride, 1952) and La ilusión viaja en tranvía (Illusion Travels by Streetcar, 1953), 89–111.
to which the story’s telling challenges the implied viewer’s ability to interpret the story itself. In this context, closure is an inherently subjective topic, especially in regards to a fictional work with multiple diegetic levels from which different viewers may derive any number of legitimate meanings. Wolfgang Iser informs us that, at least in theory, indeterminacy between text and reader “increases the variety of communication possible” (167). Readers fill in textual gaps with projections (Iser 168), and “[w]hat is concealed spurs the reader into action” (Iser 169). Indeed, depending on the passivity or activity of its audience, films like *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz* slide on a scale between two basic narrative categories which Richard Neupert has called “Closed Text” and “Open Story” films (32–33). The former term refers to “classical” Hollywood cinema which achieves complete resolution in its story as well as static symmetry in its narrative discourse. Leisurably spectators may think of *Archibaldo de la Cruz* as a “closed-text film” because of its adherence to conventional modes of telling, particularly its sudden “happy ending” which signals that the story is resolved. In the latter category, however, a film’s story is left unresolved while a closed, symmetrical narrative structure remains. More active viewers, like myself, may find that the conclusion of *Archibaldo de la Cruz* leaves them with more questions than answers about the tale. Although Neupert never deals with Buñuel, *Archibaldo de la Cruz* adheres to his description of an “open-story film” because there are certain ambiguities and contingencies in the tale, characteristic of Italian Neorealist cinema or the French New Wave (77).

Keeping in mind the topics of diegesis and closure, this study begins by looking at the film’s initial reception, followed by incursions into basic concepts of narratology as a means of teasing out the numerous genres that inspire its narrative structures. Subsequently, I examine several psychoanalytic considerations as a means of recontextualizing past criticism of the film. Buñuel’s discovery of Sigmund Freud and his theory of the unconscious had a profound effect on the director intellectually (*My Last Sigh* 228–29), explaining much of the dream-like spontaneity that characterizes his life work. In particular, the Freudian theory of obsessive-compulsive behavior is indispensable in determining Archibaldo’s mental condition and

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4Truffaut cites some similarities between *Archibaldo de la Cruz* and a few films, especially Charlie Chaplin’s comedy, *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947), but he also implies that Buñuel succeeds where other film makers have failed because his handling of episodic material does not result in a mere series of sketches (267).
evaluating whether or not he finds therapeutic closure. In fact, the underlying processes behind Archibaldo’s obsessional neurosis parallel the interpretative act that the film’s more active viewers must go through before consenting to closure. Freud himself likens obsessive desire to a sexualized literary activity: “[S]exual pleasure which is normally attached to the content of thought becomes shifted on to the act of thinking itself, and the satisfaction derived from reaching the conclusion of a line of thought is experienced as a sexual satisfaction.”5

This process might be called “quixotic desire,” a term Diana de Armas Wilson and Ruth Anthony El Saffar use in describing desire in Don Quijote. In this essay, “quixotic desire” may be thought of as the quest for power through the neurotic, obsessive, and sexualized attempts to gain self-knowledge and understanding. At the same time, however, it is a condition which moves in a contradictory direction; that is to say, quixotic desire is also about the avoidance of discovering finality and establishing a definitive end to this quest. Throughout my essay, I draw comparisons between Buñuel’s film and its Hispanic literary heritage—relying heavily on both El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha and contemporary criticism about desire in Miguel de Cervantes’s masterpiece—as a way of coming to a better understanding of how The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz’s discursive elements achieve meaning and closure for today’s viewers.

For Hispanists, film scholars, students, and cinema aficionados, this essay proposes a model for re-reading the works of Buñuel. I ask my readers to become “active viewers” of Buñuel—that is, those who engage his films on many levels of understanding. In this context, much of the basis of my essay will lean toward the argument that The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz is an unconventional, open-story film, and that critics who look at Buñuel’s works in general, especially those made during his “Mexican period,” should judge their putative conventionality on the basis of how the story is told. For friends of Buñuel’s more radical films,6 this essay proposes to read Buñuel in


6 Enthusiasts of Buñuel’s films made in the 20s, 30s, 60s and 70s will want to look at Neupert’s description of the “Open Text” (32–33; 135–176). While Neupert makes no mention of Buñuel, I would suggest that many of Buñuel’s works with Surrealist tendencies are open-story films although they rely more heavily on paratactic ordering
light of the Spanish literary heritage that greatly influenced the director's art. Filmic objects, for instance, become narrative markers—bread crumbs that help viewers retrace their steps and gain understanding. However, for those who are backers of studying Buñuel's use of object symbolism to explain his work, I would point out that the director exploits indeterminacy to the point of breaking with the generic conventions that attempt to contain meaning.

In short, I contend that the modern/postmodern split implied by these varying commitments is too simplistic a conceptual framework for dealing with a director who enjoys walking across a tight rope between the two in order to produce an art form, which, as Barbara Hernstein Smith might say, “inhabits the country between chaos and cliché” (14). Ultimately, theories of narrative discourse and psychoanalysis are necessary tools in understanding even the most conventional of Buñuel's cinema, but as a final hermeneutic objective, I offer my readers a frame of reference that may console them in interpreting Buñuel’s world of indeterminacies, for, as Schlueter says, “closure is not an ideologically neutral concept” (39). Hence, my focus turns to generic parody and its relation to the film’s social satire of the bourgeoisie. This last and crucial theme connects to the deep interplay between the film’s narrative discourse and the story, which both, as is my contention, result in an historically and politically invested art form.

I Dream of Genie: A Narratological Approach

From the moment Buñuel’s comic film noir opened, it created controversy and debate among intellectuals. Loosely based on a detective novel by Rodolfo Usigli, Ensayo de un crimen (Rehearsal of a Crime, 1944), Buñuel's making of the film was considered somewhat “criminal,” if you will. The film credits read “inspired from . . .” rather than “based on the novel” because Buñuel and his screenwriter, Eduardo Ugarte, altered both the plot and structural elements in its telling (Objects of Desire 116). Usigli and many Mexican critics, however, expected and demanded a film adaptation faithful to the author's crime novel set in the heart of Mexico City’s glamorous high than Archibaldo de la Cruz. Further investigation may place other works by Buñuel in the much more radical category of open-text cinema—that is, films with both an open story and open narrative.
society. For instance, instead of placing the protagonist in an insane asylum as Usigli had done at the end of the novel, Buñuel and Ugarte presented the audience with a “happy ending” as Archibaldo (Ernesto Alonso) makes a grand exit accompanied by a beautiful woman wearing a 1950s “rocket” brazier. A degree of controversy also surrounded the choice of an ending after the film’s international release. In response to criticism, Buñuel claims that Ado Kyrou, who published many works about the director,5 “escribió que [la escena final] era el resultado de un compromiso comercial, un happy ending. Nada de eso. El final feliz arbitrario fue idea mía. Se trata de un scherzo” (Aranda 220). According to Buñuel, the whole movie is a joke, its happy ending as absurd as its tragic beginning (Aranda 220).

Directorial intentionality aside, it is possible to view Buñuel’s film in a humorous vein, calling into question the definitiveness of the work’s closure and interpreting its ending as an ironic statement on generic form and content. Much of Archibaldo’s personal history—including references to historical events during the Mexican Revolution—is told through discursive elements of the Spanish picaresque novel, a genre which is well known as a vehicle for social satire.9 In addition to shifting the telling from a novelistic to a cinematographic discourse, Buñuel and Ugarte placed a first-person frame tale around Usigli’s third-person story, an opening which is also characteristic of the conventions of film noir. Today Buñuel’s version of Ensayo de un crimen tends to be remembered more than Usigli’s. In recent years, both internationally and in Mexico, Archibaldo de la Cruz has gained some critical recognition. For instance, Víctor Fuentes notes that the film’s narrative structures are comparable with those in novels by Juan Rulfo and Carlos Fuentes, the most innovative Mexican writers of the film director’s day (124).

The film opens with a first-person, voice-over narration about Archibaldo’s privileged upbringing while a hand literally turns the pages of a photographic history of the Mexican Revolution. There is a still-shot

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7 For an anthology of the film’s reception, including debate over Buñuel’s treatment of Usigli’s work, see Emilio García Riera (25–39).
8 In the monograph, Luis Buñuel, Kyrou states, “The Buñuelian, totally surrealist delirium of this film debouches into a calm close” (66).
9 Buñuel was very fond of the picaresque novel (My Last Sigh 220). Buñuel’s Los olvidados (The Young and the Damned, Mexico, 1950) is probably the one film that is most often compared to this classical Spanish genre. Carlos Rebolledo places Archibaldo de la Cruz within a group of Buñuel’s films with “polemical and violent” characters typical of the picaresque (141), but he does not elaborate further on Archibaldo nor does he offer a discourse analysis.
of Archibaldo’s childhood home as if it were another page in the history of Mexico and then a cross-fade to the fateful night when his world was turned upside down by the arrival of armed revolutionaries at the edge of town. The switch from history book to main action represents a long flashback, part of the confessional mode indicative of the Spanish picaresque—which immediately distinguishes between an adult first-person narrator and a child character. In addition to historical references, there are elements of a fairy tale embedded in the pseudo-picaresque opening. Little Archi’s parents (played by Eva Calvo and Enrique Díaz Indiano) are on their way to the theatre, and before they leave, the spoiled child (Rafael Banquells, Jr.) manipulates his mother into presenting him a gift to substitute for her absence. She gives him a music box and leaves him in the care of his governess (Leonor Llausas). As his mother exits, she plants a seed—once upon a time, the music box had belonged to a king—and the governess nervously continues the story for Archi. Telling the tale is as much of a distraction for her as it is for the boy because it helps to divert her attention away from history that is pounding outside her door.

According to the beauty with an hourglass figure, the music box is enchanted by a “genio” [‘genie’ or ‘fairy’]. He who possesses the magic box has the power to kill his enemies by simply willing it. The “enemy” in her story happens to fit the description of a femme fatale, and as luck would have it, little Archi does not hold his governess in high esteem. When gunfire erupts outside between federal and revolutionary forces, she moves toward a window to take a look. We view Archi glancing at the music box and then deviously gazing toward his governess at the window. Immediately, a stray bullet shatters the window pane and strikes her dead, permitting little Archi the chance to approach the corpse and gaze freely at the blood as it streams from the entry wound on her neck. Then, he (and we) scrutinize her shapely legs and hips, as her dress has bunched high enough up her thighs to expose her garters. Before we have time to reflect on the narrative supports for the telling of Archi’s sexualized fantasy, the close-up cuts to another, that of the face of a nun in her habit looking down upon us.

The flashback and its full impact—based on alternating between little Archi as character and adult Archi as narrator—can only be appreciated once we return to the narrating present. We come to realize that the alternations in the story’s telling reflects a similar contrast in the story’s content; that is, the tale of the half-dressed
corpse shocks the poor nun in much the same way the sexualized image of the thighs cutting to the saintly nun’s face surprises the viewers. In the context of the story, the adult’s first-person voice-over links the childhood scene with the character-narrator’s stay in a hospital ward where he is confessing his prepubescent necrophilia to a nun named Sister Trinidad (Chabela Durán). Archi’s tale is about his desire for the power to see all and tell all: “Le aseguro que ese sentimiento morboso me causó cierto placer [...] el placer de sentirme poderoso.” An adult mind might dismiss this incident as a mere coincidence, but only a few weeks prior to his stay in the hospital, Archi rediscovers his long lost music box in an antique store decades after it had been stolen from his family during the Mexican Revolution. “Los recuerdos de infancia son sagrados,” the store owner (Antonio Bravo) tells adult Archi. This statement is especially true if those memories result in trauma and narcissistic injury, and as we come to learn, an obsession with cold-blooded murder molds the adult’s sexual fantasies and is destined to repeat itself in thoughts, words, and deeds. To this end, Archi promptly wears out his nun-narratee. After he threatens to kill her with a straight razor, she escapes but inadvertently falls down an elevator shaft and dies.

The narrative structures constituting both Archi’s story and the pseudo-picaresque narrating present deserve closer consideration. For instance, many critics offer readings about the psychodynamic symbolism of the walking stick that appears in the film, but none notice the fact that Archi’s cane serves as a diegetic marker. Hoping to find a confessor-narratee who will legitimize his criminal fantasies, Archi uses the cane when called to make a statement to the judge (Armando Velasco) looking into the death of Sister Trinidad. The bulk of Archi’s voluntary confession takes place here about events closer to adult Archi’s present. The scene dissolves to Archi’s story, and most of the movie consists of episodes in which we witness the protagonist-narrator without the use of the walking stick. Towards the end of the movie, the narrating present resurfaces, and we see Archi, cane in hand, leaving the judge’s chambers. In the last scene of the film, he tosses it aside while walking in a park. The character and the film no longer require the cane for literal and diegetic support, inviting figurative interpretations about the future of the highborn gentleman who disposes of the object. Certainly, the predominant reading of the film, which I find plausible but ultimately unsatisfac-

10 Gerald Prince is credited with coining the term, narrataire or “narratee” (178).
tory, relies on such instances during Archi’s happy ending as evidence that he is cured of his maladies.

In addition to symbols that announce diegetic continuity, there are several discontinuities in narrative markers and subsequent ruptures in the diegesis, revealing an open-endedness to many of the film’s sequences. These anomalies subsequently lead us to doubt the reliability of Archi as first-person narrator since a primary narrative voice operates behind the scenes at the most extra-diegetic level of the text. In keeping with my discussion of the film’s exploration of genre, it is useful at this point to compare Archibaldo de la Cruz with a well-known work from the film’s Hispanic literary heritage. Don Quijote is a novel with a number of diegetic discontinuities as a result of interventions by various “inscribed authors.” In one example, Quijote receives a letter from Merlín, “protoencantador de los encantadores.” We may make an educated guess that the gold leaf on the parchment has been penned by a representative of the Duke or Duchess, authors of the premise for the wild adventure of the Countess Trifaldi (II: 41). Yet Quijote, who takes the missive at face value, believes that it confirms the fact that wise enchanters are simultaneously manipulating and recording—that is to say, narrating or even authoring—the knight’s adventures.

For his part, Archibaldo, finds himself in similar conundrums due to music-box Merlins and their “authorial” interventions. For example, on the eve of his wedding to Carlota (Ariadna Welter), Archi receives a letter revealing his fiancée’s infidelity, but the question of who penned the mysterious letter to Archi is never answered. Was it Carlota’s mother? Her lover? Carlota herself? In all likelihood, Carlota’s architect-lover, Alejandro (Rodolfo Landa), sends the note as an underhanded means of separating Carlota and Archibaldo, or, in a more twisted scenario, maybe Archibaldo was both sender and addressee of the same letter. These are plausible answers, but knowing might direct us toward a static, definitive reading of events and a dismissal of the importance of extra-diegetic ambiguities in how Archi’s story is being told. One answer for who authored the letter is

11 Umberto Eco offers a thorough explanation of “open” (33) and “closed” texts (8), the former of which June Schlueter summarizes well: “[I]n ‘open-ended’ intensification sequences, because there is no controlling character, the field of play shifts continuously [...] The impression is that events occur by chance and that the action can go anywhere, the dramatic question is less clear, the reader’s expectations are less focused, and, as a consequence, the number of possibilities for the end of the unit multiplies” (n 10, 46).
derived from returning to the primary consideration of the creation and telling of the story. Like Quixote, Archibaldo seems vaguely aware of a wise enchanter, an all-knowing genie who is the architect of his life story because every time he plots and attempts to murder someone, another power reads his mind and turns his fantasies into realities before he has the opportunity to take action. Members of the audience who are familiar with auteurist cinema are especially aware of a wise enchanter who conflates himself with the primary narrator. This implied author (a Spanish-born genie in exile) robs the titular hero of any agency in and responsibility for his actions, one of which includes recounting the outcome of the story in which he is protagonist.

Multiple diegetic levels are as much a theme of the movie as they are part of the telling of the tale, and even those spectators who are not on the lookout for signs of an auteurist director may wonder who is manipulating the story behind the scenes. Archi does what the anonymous letter says and follows Carlota to the architect’s place in order to see for himself that she has been betraying him. As he lurks behind the garden bushes in his Humphrey Bogart trench coat, we hear the sound of a freight train passing, an effect that recalls the electric toy train racing along the floor the night of his governess’s death. He moves closer toward a picture window, horizontally lined by venetian blinds, and sees Carlota and the architect embracing through it. Looking over Archi’s shoulder, we see the venetian blinds close, and the background noise of the passing train stops suddenly, as if controlled by the lever on the venetians. Inside, the viewer realizes that Carlota is trying to tell her lover good-bye forever. Outside, the fiancée waits and ponders. He is neither actor nor audience for the mini-drama that ensues on the other side of the blinded window frame, revealing a primary narrator who organizes the story and tells us what Archi does not know.

Furthermore, a love triangle is sufficient proof of characters in the film whose narratives compete with the protagonist-narrator’s attempt at reaching his preferred form of closure. Some spectators are deceived, however, by Archi’s attempt to assimilate these competing narratives during his waking dreams—delusional episodes that confuse the boundaries between the film’s multiple diegetic levels. For

12 According to Bordwell, art cinema is characterized by “its valorization of an authorial presence hovering over the text, its drift toward confusing narrator and creator, and the concomitant sense that we know vaguely how a film is produced” (332). He also awards Buñuel a position among the privileged ranks of auteurs (Bordwell 211, 231–33, 332).
example, as Archi slumps on the park bench outside the architect’s window, the first-person voice-over begins anew, and we learn that Archi has decided to play the cuckolded, class-conscious husband at the end of a wife-murder play, carefully selecting the time and place to seek revenge: “Mañana por la noche en la cámara nupcial.” In part, the elusive, disembodied voice represents Archi’s thoughts at that moment, creating a frame through which the character-narrator will guide us from the main story to a private world, one where all story elements are resolved to his satisfaction. The voice, however, also reminds us of Archi’s confession taking place in the judge’s chambers in the narrating present. Although Archi’s story basically follows a linear progression, the protagonist-narrator and his judge-narratee are recreating the past (Archi sitting on the park bench). In the background there hides a primary narrative voice which holds the film together, indirectly reminding us that such interior narrations are twice-removed from Archi’s “narrating present.” These temporal displacements—compound by the fantasies themselves that flash-forward to the future—indicate that the delusional protagonist-narrator is not really responsible for the story’s otherwise relatively stable telling. Once we have concluded our narratological detective work, we may deduce that Archi only plays the picaresque narrator as if it were a role in his “criminal life.” It is up to the principal narrative voice to close the tale. But what are the unseen forces that motivate both Archi to act and the primary narrator to relate Archi’s story?

Reeling in Closure: A Psychoanalytical Reading

Truffaut’s report that most first-time viewers think that Archibaldo de la Cruz is about “a likable guy who kills women” becomes all the more understandable when we consider that characters in the plot intensify this interpretation through their inability to offer an accurate assessment of who and what Archi represents. For instance, when Archibaldo is introduced to us in the hospital ward as possibly being criminally insane, he states that he perceives himself as two sides of the same coin, both saint and criminal: “A veces quisiera ardientemente ser un gran santo; otras veces veo con certeza que puedo ser un gran criminal.” No one, however, is capable of confirming either diagnosis. For example, his doctor (Roberto Meyer) tells the judge at Sister Trinidad’s inquest that Archibaldo is “un tipo común y corriente . . . algo taciturno quizás.” When the judge-narratee finishes listening to Archi’s confession, he announces that his only crime is an overactive
imagination: “Es Ud. un gran criminal . . . en potencia, claro.” In other words, Archi’s grandiose and contradictory self-perception never quite matches how others perceive him—a rather ordinary, harmless man with missed potential. However, the narrative voice—quietly organizing and maintaining the story’s telling—also leads us to believe the contrary.

Scholars have been quick to forget that the protagonist threatens his nun-narratee with a straight-edge razor and that she dies trying to escape her assailant. For a North American viewer, Archi commits both assault and involuntary manslaughter. While the Mexican penal code relies heavily on physical evidence and eyewitness reports in order to convict someone of a violent crime, Archi’s lengthy confession to her murder is good reason to believe that his treatment of the nun warrants, at the very least, “poetic justice.” Certainly, the judge’s decision to release Archi is precipitated by the announcement of his wife’s arrival. In other words, Buñuel does not let his viewers off the hook so easily. We are asked to weigh all the evidence that is presented, and at least in this instance, we may conclude that playing with razors really is dangerous, especially when the show of force causes someone to accidentally fall to her death. In Archi’s hand, a straight razor is a weapon, not a mere stage property used to fantasize harmlessly about murdering women. As social satire, one may conclude that the administration of justice is contingent upon its deputies’s family obligations, coffee breaks, and lunch dates. Archi may be a “likable guy,” but he is also someone who, at least indirectly, “kills women.”

Looking to similar problems in the Hispanic literary tradition, we find that closure is likewise one of the most hotly contested areas in Quijote studies, but the principles of such literary debates have not necessarily enlightened scholarly criticism in other areas, including film studies. Don Quixote’s laying down of arms, return home, and religious conversion challenges readers and scholars to this day, and the results of their readings are polarized. On the one hand, Anthony Close argues that the good knight’s return to sanity affirms the social sphere and is ultimately his grand victory. However, the North American psychoanalytic school—represented here by Carroll Johnson and Diana de Armas Wilson—tends to cite philosophers Miguel de Unamuno and José Ortega y Gasset who stress Quixote’s adventures,

13 For his part, Agustín Sánchez Vidal implies that Archi is harmless. He bases his argument on the influences of de Sade whose thought he sees in the judge’s response to Archi’s self-incriminating confession (201–2). While valid, this seems too reductive an explanation for Archibaldo de la Cruz.
not what they view as his tragic demise. Textually, the argument
supporting the work’s tragic ending echoes Sancho’s appeal to
Quixote’s sense of vitality, encouraging the hidalgo to keep creating
adventures and not give up so easily (II: 74). Despite Sancho’s
eloquent speech, Don Quixote surrenders his soul to the Church
when he confesses, having already cast aside his lance and the
chivalric order. The tired old man gives himself up to the convention-
ality and mediocrity of his class and period, a truly sad, anticlimactic
conclusion for such an adventurous soul. Once he dictates his last will
and testament, Don Quixote’s story comes to an abrupt end, and
Alonso Quijano experiences a peaceful Christian death. His is a very
bland, unchivalric ending, resulting in expressions of outrage and
betrayal by many of my own college students; in short, at least some
readers feel “cheated” by Cervantes’s choice in endings and require
time for both emotional and rational “processing” before they will
consent to closure.

In contrast with Archibaldo de la Cruz’s happy ending, walking arm-
in-arm with a bosomy beauty into the horizon, Alonso Quijano gives
up pursuit of all his previous passions and desires. In this context,
Archibaldo de la Cruz could be read as an inversion of Quijote’s comic
beginning and tragic ending, a literary comparison which proves
useful, given Archibaldo de la Cruz’s pseudo-picaresque frame tale
established at the beginning of the film. Quixote, a pícaro-styled
member of the upper class, has a conversation about closure with a
“real” pícaro, Ginés de Pasamonte, a man at the other end of the
classed social structure. As regards his own memoirs, the picaresque
author, Ginés, negates the possibility of finishing his life story as long
as he is alive: “¿Cómo puede estar acabado,’ respondió él, ‘si aún no
está acabada mi vida?” (I: 22). By taking the generic definition to its
grotesque extreme, a picaresque story cannot end until the subject
finishes confessing and dies. Sufficiently close in composition to a
picaresque hero, Quixote would have suffered infinite adventures at
the hands of less talented authors had his creator not abruptly killed
him at the end, a topic the author addresses in the prologue to the
second novel. In brief, the death of one’s protagonist might be
thought of as the ultimate authorial intervention, but Buñuel finds an
alternate route by exploiting Hollywood convention.

Not unlike the Quijote,14 Archibaldo de la Cruz displays a hodgepodge

14 Cervantes’s novelistic masterpiece is comprised of multiple narrative genres,
including the chivalric, pastoral, sentimental, picaresque, psychological, and folkloric
traditions (Murillo I: 28–30).
of narrative genres before reaching the film’s final frame. A move toward closure begins when the fallen protagonist-narrator departs his confessor’s office. Separated from his role as narrator, the main diegesis of Archi’s story ironically continues but begins to sputter and stall. Without the first-person narrator, another character who serves as narratee, and the structural frame of a logical narrating present, we may ask, “how could the story end?” After the judge-narratee rejects the confession and releases this “picaro-wannabe,” Archi returns home depressed as a simple character, not the empowered protagonist-narrator that he once was. His authority has effectively been undermined when the judge thwarts his attempts at portraying himself as a “legitimate criminal.”

If Archi were the only narrator, his story would logically end here, but the primary, omniscient narrator takes complete control, offering viewers an epilogue in which Archi appears to go through a transformation—a proactive, vitalistic conversion. Stuffing the music box in a canvas bag, he marches off to Chapultepec Park and hurls the genie-infested object into the water. Archi and the story of his criminal life seem to surrender to Hollywood form, experiencing what so many critics have viewed as a celluloid, psychoanalytic “breakthrough.” While a few critics have noted the ending’s irony and even absurdity, none have chosen to explore the final sequence’s lack of verisimilitude or how it punches a hole in the film’s story. In effect, Archi’s very name is in agreement with the void both in his character and the film’s ending. The choice of “Archibaldo” for the film version of Ensayo de un crimen—replacing the name “Roberto” in the novel—is suggestive of need since “Archibaldo” is a “pre-eminently lacking” name. As a prefix, “archi-” declares superiority, but “baldo” is a word associated with being void in a suit of cards. Neither we nor the titular hero can claim to hold all the cards, and in this regard, the story can never be played out to a decisive end.

In addition to the picaro’s confession of a life of crime (told to a judge), the “case” of Archibaldo de la Cruz may be read in other discursive contexts, especially the psychoanalytic patient’s exploration of the self (told to a therapist). In order to build a case against himself, Archi can only offer the judge a confession since there is no physical evidence to support his claims. In much the same way, psychoanalytic therapy relies on the patient as he talks his way to a cure because there is no physical trail for patient or analyst to follow. We see Archi’s doctor at the inquest for Sister Trinidad, reporting to the judge that Archi’s nerves were frayed after Carlota’s death and
that he ordered two weeks of complete rest for his patient. Archi, nonetheless, never appears in the film with an analyst-narratee—a person who is as absent in the story of Archi’s life as was his father. In other words, despite Archi’s brief “rest” in the hospital, there is no evidence that he is receiving the direct intervention of an analyst. This is an important clue in interpreting Archi’s case—one that has never been taken into account even though psychoanalytically-informed approaches have predominated in scholarly studies of the film. Assuming that a patient’s case is not a neurobiological disorder, relief can usually be found through the process of analyst-mediated transference (SE 10: 209). Ironically, Buñuel has little faith in the application of psychoanalysis (My Last Sigh 229). Whether with or without direct discourse between patient and therapist, it would seem that there is little hope for satisfactory, therapeutic closure in Archi’s case.

In the most convincing psychoanalytically-based reading of Archibaldo de la Cruz to date, Peter Evans states that “Archibaldo’s fixation with his mother, his refusal or inability to submit himself to the due processes of Oedipal development, highlight attempts to deal with reality through regression and denial. At this level, the mother (previously regarded as saint/virgin, the gratifier of desire) becomes the witch/whore, through whom desire is frustrated” (103). Evans and other critics, however, ignore that Archi’s story also reads like a case history of an obsessional neurosis (in which the Oedipal consideration is only a piece of the puzzle), a condition in which the subject remembers, reenacts compulsive and obsessive thoughts, but at the same time struggles to avoid them. If “childhood memories are sacred,” then Archibaldo is a neurotic who received too much pleasure from the reified element of the childhood event cited earlier (the death of his governess after having wished for it), and his behavior is to avoid what he sees as an end of his desire. Since the death of his governess was also a childhood trauma, it keeps recurring in symbolic form.15 In Archi’s case, the reappearance of the music box and its little tune in his adult life triggers numerous criminally

15 Archi’s story takes on specific details in common with those in Sigmund Freud’s case history about “The Rat Man,” especially the patient’s early childhood sexual infatuation with his governess (SE 10: 160–65) as well as his subsequent adult impulse to slash an old woman with his straight razor as a means of gaining access to his beloved (SE 10: 259–60). Archi’s desire to be either a saint or an infamous criminal also echoes the Rat Man, whose father is reported to have said, “The child will be either a great man or a great criminal!” (SE 10: 205).
violent, sexual fantasies which come dangerously closer to real murder every time they are repeated. As a matter of therapeutic routine, Archi’s only way out of his destructive downward spiral is a symbolic reintegration of the original childhood trauma, but this process never occurs in the film. He recalls and avoids until the very end.

In an intriguing application of Freudian theories about dream interpretation in her reading of what Quixote saw in the Cave of Montesinos (II: 23–24), Wilson affirms that “the object of Don Quixote’s desire is the studious avoidance of its own fulfillment” (71). Like the old knight who has elaborate dreams about a sorcerer’s enchantment of his saintly lady, Dulcinea del Toboso, Archi’s adventures take on similar oneiric characteristics which he attempts to verify and legitimize by telling the tale of his criminal life. In accordance with Evans’s Oedipal reading and my own interpretation that Archi suffers from an obsessional neurosis, the hero takes refuge in his own imagination, seeking object permanence in idealized “saintly” women who are unavailable or absent (his mother, Carlota, the nun) as a means of avoiding gratification of his desire. For her part, Carlota likes Archi to see her praying to the Holy Virgin in her family’s private chapel. Of course, there is also the nun in the hospital ward to whom Archi offers a direct route to eternal life by means of his trusty straight-edge razor, but some of the more interesting religious associations are a result of his contact with femmes fatales.

When Quixote is being worn down on a Barcelona dance floor by a pair of women who appear to be seducing him, he exclaims, “Fugite, partes adversae! dejadme en mi sosiego, pensamientos mal venidos” (II: 62). He attempts to stay on the straight and narrow, ever mindful of his faithful dedication to Dulcinea del Toboso. In contrast with Quixote’s dance-hall experiences, Archi takes avoidance a step further by seeking the death of his enemies—the “criminal” women who assert their power over him. As in Don Quijote, altars and other religious symbols appear in connection with women who are the object of Archi’s sexual desire—including, in Archibaldo of the Cross’s case, the women he wants to destroy in order to recreate his governess’s murder. Like Carlota with her private chapel, the first

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16 In addition to daydreams and other fantasies, the Rat Man was superstitious and “believed in premonitions and in prophetic dreams” (SE 10: 230). Like the Rat Man, who believed in his own omnipotence (SE 10: 233–34), Archi expresses guilt during his confession for having wished someone dead and later discovering that the wish came true.
woman Archi begins to stalk—a gold digger named Patricia Terrazas (Rita Macedo)—also has a homemade shrine in her apartment dedicated to male celebrities, some of whom were former lovers. One is a “martyred” bullfighter whose portrait hangs above two banderillas set crossways. Of course, her altar is also indirectly dedicated to herself since it is implied that Patricia brought these men together to worship. Later, in a “typical” bar that foreign tourists like to frequent, Archi encounters the second woman he will begin to stalk—a model, tour guide, and gold digger named Lavinia (Mirosława Stern). On one wall is a small shrine to the Virgin, and Lavinia herself appears unto Archi surrounded by flames from cups of punch, the “typical” drink in the tavern.

From the moment Archi saw Lavinia in the bar “rodeada de llamas, como una pequeña bruja condenada a la hoguera,” he has thought of her as his “pequeña Juana de Arco,” the famous saint who was martyred when burned at the stake. Like the childhood situation with his governess, sexual desire is also inextricably linked to the violent obliteration and death of that image. This is compounded by the fact that Lavinia and her sugar daddy were about to purchase one of the primary symbols of that event—the music box that had been missing since the Mexican Revolution—at precisely the moment Archi happens into the antique shop and stops the sale. When Lavinia eventually meets Archi at his home to sit and model for him in his private art studio, he promptly introduces her to his deaf-mute cousin, who is really one of the wax mannequins of Lavinia from another of her modeling contracts. The animated Lavinia likes the joke, and greets her hermanita. Later, he sneaks behind the real Lavinia in order to gag or strangle her with a towel, but the doorbell rings. A startled Archi answers the door, and roles are reversed. Lavinia, the potentially unwitting victim of Archi’s deviousness, is herself impeccably devious. Since the part-time model is also a tour guide, a group of her gringuitos are waiting outside to meet the unsuspecting artist and see his “typical” Mexican home and workshop. Before departing with her tour group, she leaves Archi with an even bigger surprise, news of her eminent marriage. As she goes, she cheerfully taunts him by mentioning the mannequin: “Pero puede Ud. consolarse con mi hermanita. Bye-bye.”

Multiple representations of the same person in the same scene—in this case, the live model meeting the inanimate model—are reminiscent of a dream-like state. These oneiric characteristics mushroom once Archi is left alone. He takes Lavinia’s suggestion and assumes
the role of a melodramatic villain in a short, silent film, choosing to burn her in effigy inside his enormous kiln.\textsuperscript{17} We may attempt to excuse his violent behavior because a mannequin is, after all, an inanimate object, and Archi’s sexual desire involves what would otherwise be a “harmless” fascination with autoerotica. In other words, Archi expresses his sexually transgressive fantasies through cross-dressing,\textsuperscript{18} stalking, voyeurism, life-sized doll play, and a hint of necrophilia. Nonetheless, cremation is a tremendously cruel and sadistic wish, and if not for his “bad luck,” Archi could do someone real harm. Peering through the window of his kiln, Archi seems as satisfied with the results as if he had murdered and incinerated the real Lavinia. From this dress rehearsal, it is apparent that a living, breathing human being is not the love object itself but simply another symbol of Archi’s desire.\textsuperscript{19} Dangerous consequences await further disassociative episodes since human objects burn as easily as wax mannequins.

At best, Archi’s “happy ending” may be evidence that his repetition compulsion is going into abeyance,\textsuperscript{20} but even this is unlikely within the narrative context of the film. Archi has to embrace the reified object of his desire in order to free himself from his original childhood trauma. Destroying the symbol of his obsessive-compulsive disorder is simply insufficient; that is, hurling the music-box genie who torments him into a place where genies like to dwell seems like a bogus way of going about it given the story’s premise. Although Archi symbolically drowns the music-box ballerina and her little tune, according to the fairy tale his governess had told him, genies live in “the air, water, and fire” (emphasis mine). When Archi abandons the music box in a park lake, he temporarily finds a way of distancing himself from the trail of clues that lead back to the childhood origins of his criminal desire and pleasure, but he is far from “cured.” To the

\textsuperscript{17} A televised broadcast of these scenes plays in the background of a long sequence in Pedro Almodóvar’s \textit{Carne trémula} (\textit{Live Flesh}, Spain, 1997).

\textsuperscript{18} Archi’s initial appearance in the film is as a little boy wearing his mother’s dress shoes, hat, and corset over his pajamas. When his governess drags the cross-dressed child out of a family wardrobe, little Archi’s grand entrance is one of literally coming out of the closet.

\textsuperscript{19} For the obsessional neurotic, “acts [of love] no longer relate to another person, the object of love and hatred, but are auto-erotic acts such as occur in infancy” (\textit{SE} 10: 244).

\textsuperscript{20} Repetition compulsion is likely in the obsessional neurotic’s attempt to banish doubt stemming from the constant internal struggle between love and hate (\textit{SE} 10: 239–43).
contrary, a variation of this argument is that Archi drowns the music box because he plans on being a “real” criminal from this point forward. Rehearsal time is over now that he has nearly succeeded in murdering the nun. Ultimately, however, it is up to the viewer to reach at least one of these conclusions and consent to closure, making the case that Archi is either criminal or saint based on scanty evidence and inadequate witness reports. Thus, the above psychoanalytical intervention, like the previous narratological analysis, achieves stimulating results in interpreting the film, but it also underlines the fact that the story of Archi’s life has been left wide open.

**Closure in the Wake of Satire and Parody**

Unlike Cervantes’s Don Quixote, who dies a mediocre death in the bosom of Christianity, Buñuel leaves a clear opening, not a conventional closing, for his hero to continue his life of crime. We find an ironic suspension of closure in Archi’s story, self-referentially asking us to interrogate film as a generic form of telling. When the last scene fades out, Archi is walking arm-in-arm with his equally perverse rival, having just replaced the cane with the support of Lavinia’s arm. Closing symbols—such as the music box, the cane, or Archi’s chance encounter with a grasshopper—tease us and cannot guarantee the assertion that, “[p]urged of his obsession to kill women, Archibaldo de la Cruz is redeemed as a human being once again, symbolized by his rescue of an insect” (Mellen 18–19). While a few critics note that the film’s ending is ironic, they also “buy into” the commercial diegetic application of heterosexual bliss—often associated with the Spanish *comedia* and Hollywood happy endings. Although the grasshopper lends itself to figurative analysis, it also simply marks Archibaldo’s bucolic location. “Chapultepec,” the name of the park, literally means “hill of grasshoppers” in Nahuatl (*Diccionario Básico Espasa* 2: 1634–35).

The conclusion is too much of a *non sequitur* to be easily accepted on face value. The cinematographic formula of a happy ending for

\[21\] Mellen’s claim, while plausible, is a bit of a leap since the grasshopper never requires rescue. As “readers,” we must jump over gaps in the story, and understandably numerous critics project cruel intentions onto Archi. Among those who place importance on the scene with the grasshopper (which some think is a praying mantis) are Freddy Buache (79), Alberto Cattini (40), Marie-Cécile Estève (192), Víctor Fuentes (128), Virginia Higginbotham (96), Antonio Monegal Brancós (168), and François Truffaut (267).
those of high social standing is incongruent with who Archibaldo and Lavinia have portrayed themselves to be (an aspiring murderer and a gold digger). Buñuel offers a formulaic conclusion for morally unexemplary characters—those of means who are undeserving of a happy ending because they take so much and contribute so little to society. Ultimately, it is up to the film’s viewers to accept or reject its ending as a satisfactory form of closure, and active viewers, those who interrogate the film’s end, are not convinced that Archi has redeemed himself. Especially in terms of its discursive function, Archibaldo de la Cruz’s ending adheres to the generic conventions of both dramatic comedy and most Hollywood film, but in so doing, it presents a conflict with its other classical narrative forms, particularly its pseudo-picaresque frame tale. Barbara Babcock poses the question, “How do you conclude the picaro’s life and adventures and yet maintain the novel’s fundamental ambiguity?” (111, emphasis hers). If a picaro attempts to socially reintegrate, the gesture is “based on false premises and self-delusion” (Babcock 111). The pseudo-picaresque frame tale supports the argument that the story of The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz cannot end until Archi’s life has concluded. And so, Archi will continue rehearsing (and inadvertently committing) brutal sex crimes in order to rediscover the power of the “I” as a consequence of having adventures to tell.

Throughout the film, we find that generic parody is used in conjunction with social satire—a well-established combination in the Hispanic narrative tradition—leading its readers down the slippery slope of ambiguity. The result is also an indirect way of disposing of the problem of closure. For example, scholarly criticism about Cervantes’s Novelas ejemplares stresses that the author is cunningly vague about the use of the word “exemplary” in the title of the collection. If it means stories that express a moral exemplarity, then why are their lessons so lacking in didacticism? Or is it a learn-by-example work on how to write modern tales? In the case of The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz, we may pose both questions. Like Cervantes’s characters in Don Quijote and the Novelas ejemplares,

22 Before sighting Lavinia through the trees, Archi strolls and twirls his cane in a Chaplinesque style. As Bordwell notes, Buñuel uses “cripples” as an authorial signature (211), and to this extent, the Spanish director simultaneously acknowledges Chaplin and his little tramp’s signature while superimposing his own trademark over the former.

23 For more on the Novelas’s exemplarity, see E. C. Riley (81–115) and Alban Forcione (3–30).
Buñuel fills Archibaldo de la Cruz with doctors who misdiagnose their patients, policemen who do not investigate crimes, judges who do not convict criminals, older men who could be (and often act like) the fathers of their younger fiancées, upstanding dames who act like madams, virgin daughters who are experienced lovers, and boys who dress in women’s clothing. For example, one of the secondary characters in the film is suspiciously named Mrs. Cervantes (Andrea Palma), a grande dame who helps her daughter and her daughter’s married lover hide their relationship from Archibaldo. Her main role is to weave tales about sick relatives, house renovations, and headaches so that Carlota will always pass for the virgin Archibaldo hopes to marry. In her excuse-making, storytelling capacity, Mrs. Cervantes leads us to wonder about her “exemplarity.” Why does she help her daughter with an illicit love affair, and are the movie’s narrators as unreliable as she?

Buñuel spent a lifetime lampooning the bourgeoisie, and Archibaldo de la Cruz is one of his satiric masterpieces, a point that exclusively psychoanalytic treatments of the movie fail to address. Despite the film’s ambiguous “exemplarity”—its almost Cervantine appearance, seamlessly confounding generic categorization and principles of socially acceptable content—Buñuel grounds Archi’s story in social satire and patriarchal critique. For instance, during Archi and Carlota’s wedding reception in Mrs. Cervantes’s home, Buñuel devotes several minutes to a conversation between a priest, a colonel, and a police commissioner—the same man who ruled that the death of Patricia Terrazas was a suicide and hurried from the scene for a cup of coffee. The commissioner (Carlos Riquelme) sits beside the priest (Carlos Martínez Baena) and colonel (Manuel Dondé) and says that he had to leave the wedding ceremony, still in progress, because he started to cry. Confiding to the priest, he states that he is always moved to tears when attending a wedding, baptism or confirmation.

The priest agrees that church ceremony is unique, and goes so far as to say that its pomp and poetry rise far above the vulgarity and prosaic character of a civilian ceremony. The colonel chimes in and teases the police commissioner, calling him a “sentimental” man. Somewhat offended, the commissioner retorts, “En todo y por todo, gracias a Dios.” He then goes on to say that when he sees an army regiment pass by with flag unfurled, the experience always leaves him with a knot in his throat and tears in his eyes. The colonel agrees and placates the commissioner: “Eso es natural entre personas bien nacidas. Es la emoción patriótica.” Together, the three share an
intimate moment, amusingly jumping into the same comfortable bed, housed by a state that supports a tiny elite. All three men have a great deal in common; they belong to a class of functionaries (legal, religious, and military) that legitimates and protects the lives of the idle rich—like Archi, Carlota, her lover, and Mrs. Cervantes—by awarding them an aura of respectability during the “happy days” of the 1950s.24

In conventional interpretations of Archibaldo de la Cruz, critics—as well as viewers who are “inspired to find unity in all things” (Neupert 180)—tend to disregard sequences that appear to have no direct bearing on the main characters or plot, as evidenced by the sheer lack of critical commentary about the polite conversation between the three gentlemen at the wedding.25 Nonetheless, this is the only sequence in the film that does not directly center around Archi, a feature that bears pondering in what is otherwise a tightly knit narrative structure. Concurrent with the actual wedding ceremony that we do not witness, this scene gives way to the main story when Archi and Carlota are about to leave the chapel, demonstrating once again that the film’s discourse operates on multiple diegetic levels. Seated in a semicircle, the three men appear to preside over the wedding party, voyeuristically watching those who watch the chapel door with anticipation. The three men are pleasantly interrupted by Carlota’s lover, Alejandro, who greets them and then excuses himself. Moments later, after the newlyweds exit the chapel, a portrait photographer has the bride pose with other members of the wedding party. We actually look through the camera’s viewfinder as the photographer takes aim, centers the frame around the bride, and shoots the picture. When we return to our more conventional position in relation to the main diegesis—in this instance, as if we were next to the photographer—we see the smile on Carlota’s face change to a look of terror as she gazes back in the direction of the camera. Initially, she sees what we cannot; her lover is standing behind the photographer, holding a pistol in his hand, and he promptly shoots Carlota dead. In this regard, the exchange of

24 According to Peter H. Smith, the left was definitively purged from the ruling party during Miguel Alemán’s presidency (1946–52) (103), and the army assumed the role of “silent partner” within the political class” (96). In addition, the Church was offered a place within the ruling party in order to support Alemán’s successor, thus weakening the position of the conservative opposition (Smith 107).

25 A notable exception is García Riera who transcribes their dialogue and includes it in his descriptive commentary about the film (27–28).
pleasantries between Alejandro and the three gentlemen returns us to the stalled plot in the main diegesis only to surprise us when we see Alejandro again moments later with gun in hand.

When the plot suddenly accelerates again, we are confronted with the satiric shift from comic (Carlota’s smile) to tragic (her look of terror), a situation which poses the problem of a second reading level for the active spectator to resolve. The shift signals that there is an undercurrent of seriousness to the text since she sees what we cannot. If we look beneath the comic tide, our expression could change too once we contemplate the story’s tragic depths. The architect and Carlota’s unsuccessful love affair surprisingly imposes itself on what might have been the picture-perfect story told in Archibaldo and Carlota’s wedding album. In fact, there is a shot included in this sequence of Alejandro and the portrait photographer’s backs. As he holds the smoking gun over the shoulder of the kneeling photographer, we gaze past both of them at the fallen bride across the room. Through a comparison of the multiple perspectives in this sequence, we might conclude that the better, safer position for us to assume is behind the director’s movie camera since it provides us with sufficient distance with which to evaluate and reject both the storybook scenes of this marriage and the film’s apparent lightness. This voyeuristic position also serves as a counterpoint to the presence of the priest, colonel and police commissioner whose attendance and commentary legitimate the marriage ceremony.

The day of the wedding also contrasts with the night when the Mexican Revolution arrived on the doorstep of Archi’s boyhood home. Shooting erupted and ruined his mother’s selfishly aristocratic expectations of attending the theatre, and she promptly protested the street violence to Archi’s father: “¿Te parece poco habernos dejado sin teatro!” On Archi’s wedding day, however, it is a young, urban professional who pulls the trigger, suggesting that the bourgeoisie in the 1950s is only threatened by personal animosities within its class. Despite the tenets of the Mexican Revolution and its attempts at social reform decades earlier, the bourgeoisie successfully restored its hegemony. Ironically, good manners signal Alejandro’s class status. He is a polite murderer and only fires his handgun once the wedding ceremony is concluded, thus, contributing to the climax of the spectacle. Tonight, both in the cinema and at the wedding reception, no member of the gentrified audience will complain that social revolutionaries deprived them of seeing a really good show.

Although fate appears to intervene and Archi never directly kills
anyone during the course of the film, my reading coincides with that
of Buñuel many years after the film’s production: “[Archibaldo] is a
killer. But evidently he also enjoys the frustration, he adores it”
(Objects of Desire 119). In the same interview, he goes on to add the
following: “Now then, the audience can ask itself, what is going to
happen to Lavinia? Archibaldo may kill her an hour later, because
nothing really indicates that he has changed” (Objects of Desire 121).
The happy ending—Archi and Lavinia walking arm-in-arm into the
horizon—pokes fun at itself as one of the trite conventions on the
commercial screen. The film’s “ready-to-wear” solution is too simplis-
tic for its hero’s complicated mental condition; it is a formula that
tells us all is well, and we in the audience no longer have to think in
order to figure out the film’s content.

In contrast, the conclusion to Archi’s life of crime is sufficiently
disconcerting to produce the opposite effect; the final frames imitate
the generic ending indicative of Hollywood feature film, but they also
leave the active viewer confused and thinking about Archi’s story. This
perplexed state may lead one to ask, “If I accept and believe in this
film’s happy ending, as I have in so many other movies, then is the
joke on me?” In this regard, social satire envelopes the discourse of
generic parody and puts it into its service. The film subtly accuses its
audience of socially reproducing the bourgeoisie; that is, the passive
viewer’s acceptance of generic normativity—such as celluloid happy
endings—coincides with “upper-class” priorities of social acceptance
and avoidance of marginalization at all cost. Like Don Quixote de la
Mancha, a name that designates both place of origin and a literal
“stain,” one variation on the last syllables of “Archibaldo” is “baldón,”
meaning a blemish on one’s honor. With bucket in hand, the desire
to ascend the social ladder is contingent upon white-washing over any
stains on one’s honor, including attempted murder or having been
made to look like a cuckold. To this extent, a happy ending neatly
appears to restore Archi’s reputation, but, in picaresque fashion, it is
“based on false premises and self-delusion.”

Regardless of how many of the story’s diegetic levels are finally
engaged and interrogated, an interpretative apparatus can only
succeed by subjectively choosing a frame through which to read the
film. Since little Archi’s trauma occurred the night the Mexican
Revolution came to town, adult Archi’s pathology might be explained
as an aristocratic reaction against the leftist-populist tendencies that
historically framed his “criminal life.” Archibaldo seeks object perma-
nence in an idealized, saintly virgin as a means of avoiding final
gratification of his desire. In addition to the sexualized “bad” woman who must be killed, it is the powerful, politicized woman—guilty by association with the trauma he experienced during the Revolution—who must also be eliminated. Given the film’s historical point of departure, Buñuel implies that Archi’s psychoanalytic “cure” for his destructive tendencies can only take place within a particular political context.26 Archi’s picaresque confession, reminiscent of the therapeutic process on an analyst’s couch, must be told to a narratee other than a representative of the Church (Sister Trinidad) or the bourgeois state (the judge) in order to find relief. According to Buñuel, however, “psychoanalysis [is] severely limited, a form of therapy reserved for the upper classes” (My Last Sigh 229). Indeed there would seem to be few therapeutic prospects for Archi to gain self-awareness in relation to the psycho-social processes beyond his control, the same ones that resulted in the initial revolutionary threat to his family’s class standing and his subsequent childhood trauma decades earlier.

This reading of Ensayo de un crimen / The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz requires a return to the film’s opening sequence because the end is itself a discursive reflection of the beginning—a classical move toward symmetry producing a closed narrative form. The hand turning the pages of a photographic history of the Mexican Revolution settles on a page of Archi’s personal history, especially as the Revolution played out in his life in the 1950s. In Spanish, historia signifies “history,” “story,” and “storytelling,” all of which are tricky matters in Archi’s case. In this context, the historia of Mexico will continue to move in a circle—like the pretty ballerina who twirls to the genie’s tune atop the music box—unless Archi and a nation can embrace the causes of their revolutionary trauma. As long as the Church and military cast their spell on the civilian state, a well-heeled elite has the luxury of taking refuge in its private, literary dream world. In the case of our wealthy, quixotic picaresco-wannabe, his agency will continue to be stolen from him by malevolent genies and enchanters, even in his attempts to actualize his violent sex crimes against women. As Archi says when he finishes his confession to the judge, “[U]na intervención extraña […] hizo que no pudiera llevar a cabo mis propósitos . . . pero se cumplieron.” With all the pomp and circumstance of an extra-diegetic orchestral accompaniment in a

26 This is reminiscent of Louis Althusser’s concept of an “imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (152–55).
grand Hollywood movie ending, the implied auteur ironically joins forces with the patriarchal institutions that direct history behind the scenes. Seemingly left to chance, their agenda mysteriously coincides with Archi’s violent fantasies, and, so, anonymous genies appear willing to grant our hero his every wish—albeit teasingly—until the end of time.

Lafayette College

* Most scenes have no musical accompaniment other than the music box within the main diegesis, making the final orchestral arrangement that much more shocking. Although we hear the music-box tune played by an organ in a minor key during Archi’s delusional moments, these instances appear to be bridges to the intra-diegetic because Archi seems to hear the eerie tune playing inside his head. They are, however, disconcerting in their abruptness. These anomalies—like the moment when the sound of the freight train appears to be silenced by the lever on the venetian blinds—are also indicative of the principal narrative voice’s intervention. To this extent, extra-diegetic sounds are so infrequent and abrupt as to become bothersome (and comic).

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