

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE CRIMINAL LIFE OF ARCHIBALDO DE LA CRUZ / *Ensayo de un crimen* (1955)
Luis Buñuel (1900-1983)

OVERVIEW

Auteur Luis Buñuel is known as one of most influential surrealist filmmakers of the mid-twentieth century. Although he was born and raised near Zaragoza, Spain, he spent a large portion of his life and career as an exile in Paris and Mexico City. One of his earliest short films, *Le chien andalou* (1929), or the *Andalusian Dog*, became an iconic representation of eerie surrealist art in which Buñuel presented the audience with a series of unsettling, violent, and even erotic images plucked from a dream. Buñuel would continue in his surrealist style with such films as *L'Age D'or* (1930), or the *Age of Gold*. During his long exile in Mexico, Buñuel wrote and directed a handful of commercial films, including the featured thriller of this essay, *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz* (1955). The middle period of Buñuel's career was also characterized by three satirical dramas loosely based on nineteenth-century Spanish novels: *Nazarín* (1959), *Viridiana* (1961), and *Tristana* (1970). In the 1970s, Buñuel returned to his hyper-erotic and surreal style in such films as *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972) and *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977).

Film *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz* (1955) is a black and white film set in Mexico City in the 1940s with flashbacks to Archibaldo's youth during and after the Mexican Revolution (1910-1930). The title character is a mentally troubled, would-be assassin who plans (or rehearses) murdering women, but he never actually commits murder. Buñuel and fellow screenwriter Eduardo Ugarte adapted the novel of the same title (*Ensayo de un crimen* (1944), literally translated as "Rehearsal of a Crime") by renowned Mexican playwright Rodolfo Usigli. The genre of the film could best be described as a post-war thriller in the style of Alfred Hitchcock.

Background Due to a long exile in Mexico, Buñuel's films in the 1940s and 1950s were often shot in and around Mexico City. *Criminal Life* was no exception: it was filmed in the famed Churubusco Studio and the iconic Chapultepec Park in Mexico City. The cast of this film did not include Buñuel's Mexican favorites, but the casting of Miroslava, a Czech-Mexican actress, is notable in that her face and body were similar to Hitchcock's blonds. Unfortunately, Miroslava committed suicide shortly after filming ended on *Criminal Life*. The film was nominated for several Ariel awards (the Mexican Oscars), but did not win any. *Criminal Life* is a good exemplar of Buñuel's more commercial style during the 1950s and acts as a follow-up to his earlier melodramas *Susana* (1951) and *This Strange Passion* (1953). On the other hand, *Criminal Life* has generated a large quantity of scholarship due its distinctly Buñuelian qualities.

CHARACTERS

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| <i>Archibaldo de la Cruz</i> | The protagonist who plans murders |
| <i>Governess</i> | Archibaldo's nanny who dies in an accident |
| <i>Señor de la Cruz</i> | Archibaldo's father |
| <i>Señora de la Cruz</i> | Archibaldo's mother |
| <i>Lavinia</i> | Archibaldo's friend and potential victim |
| <i>Chucho</i> | Lavinia's elder fiancé |
| <i>Patricia Terrazas</i> | Lavinia's coworker |
| <i>Willy Corduran</i> | Patricia's boyfriend |
| <i>Carlota Cervantes</i> | Archibaldo's fiancé |
| <i>Alejandro Rivas</i> | The architect and Carlota's married lover |

SYNOPSIS

Archibaldo de la Cruz is a well-to-do artist who fantasizes about killing women—in particular, women he dates casually. As the original title suggests (translated literally as "Rehearsal of a Crime"), Archibaldo does not manage to murder the objects of his desire himself. Rather, the women die by unfortunate accidents, suicide, or in the case of Carlota, her lover shoots her. Nonetheless, Archibaldo continues to

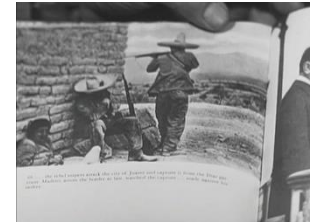
fantasize about and plan various murders until he “confesses” his crimes to a judge. His homicidal tendencies are incited in part by the playing of a music box that belonged to his mother. As a boy, Archibaldo was entranced by the story of a king who could kill his enemies simply by playing the magical music box.

Archibaldo’s first lust for murder occurs when his governess is shot through a window during a skirmish in the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920). Later, when Archibaldo is a young adult, various women die around him: a nun who is administering to him in a hospital, a gambling gold digger, and Archibaldo’s fiancée, Carlota, who is shot at the reception at their wedding. Only one woman survives a relationship with Archibaldo, and that is Lavinia, a fashion model and tourist guide. When Archibaldo meets her in Mexico City’s Chapultepec Park at the end of the film, the viewer wonders whether they will live happily ever after or whether Archibaldo will end up killing her.

SCENES

CHILDHOOD

Spoiled childhood and violence of the Mexican Revolution Archibaldo’s governess calls him over to eat dinner. The boy hides in the closet wearing blankets, and the governess pulls him out. She scolds him and says that he deserves a whipping. Archibaldo’s mother enters and remarks that her son is always a *diablillo* (‘little devil’). She asks him to behave, and Archibaldo nods. When his mother reminds him that she is going to the theater with papa, Archibaldo yells that he wants her to stay with him. His mother replies that if he is good and lets her go, she will give him a present. Archibaldo guesses correctly that he is about to get the music box. Archibaldo’s voice describes the violence of the Mexican Revolution while turning the pages of a non-fiction book that show dead bodies from various battles. Archibaldo mentions that his parent’s house in the province capital was only one of the few remaining “tranquil” places during the war. He goes on to explain that his family lived comfortably, he was an only child, and his mother adored him. The camera fades from an exterior shot of the “comfortable” house to an interior shot of a train set in the living room. The train circles the tracks. The “voiceover” adult Archibaldo admits that he was pretty spoiled.



The Magic Music Box The governess feeds Archibaldo and scolds him for misbehaving. She reminds him that his parents paid her to teach him manners, and he replies that is because they have money. The governess laments that Archibaldo is not more mature. Archibaldo’s mother enters with the music box and asks the governess to tell the story of the king who used to own the music box. The camera cuts back to Archibaldo and the governess, who agrees to tell Archibaldo the full story. The governess explains that the original owner of the music box was a genie who gave it to a king. The king used it to curse his enemies, with a result that each one died every time the music played. She goes on to explain that the king even killed his queen when he suspected her of being unfaithful.



1st Death: The Governess The story of the music box is interrupted by the battle outside. The governess walks to the window. The adult Archibaldo describes how, as a child in that moment, he was engrossed in the story and hoped that he could have the same power as the king. When the young Archibaldo looks up at the governess, she is suddenly struck by a stray bullet. When she collapses, dead, Archibaldo walks over to the body, mesmerized. He looks at her gartered legs and the blood running down her temple. The adult Archibaldo says that even as a boy, he took pleasure in the thought that he had caused her death.



2nd Death: The Nun The camera cuts to a close-up of a nun's face as she listens intently to the adult Archibaldo's narration. We see the adult Archibaldo in a hospital bed, and he continues describing the pleasure he felt at his governess's death. The nun serves Archibaldo but says that she wished she hadn't heard such a macabre tale. She goes on to say that she hopes he is making it all up, but Archibaldo asserts that he remembers every detail as if it were a photograph. He tries to grab her and tell her more, but the nun pulls away and enters the adjoining bathroom. Archibaldo takes out a pocket knife from a bag with several other knives. When the nun emerges from the bathroom, Archibaldo stays standing and asks the nun if she is always on good terms with God. She replies yes, and he brandishes the knife. The nun runs back into the bathroom and out of a side door. She keeps running up and down the hospital halls, and Archibaldo watches her from his room. When she sees an open elevator, the nun runs through the doors and falls to her death. The camera cuts to an exterior shot of the elevator shaft.



1st Confession: Visiting the Judge A doctor and a judge are discussing the accidental death of the nun. The doctor reports that the elevator door was stuck open. The judge asks why the nun was running, but the doctor just shrugs it off. The judge receives word that Archibaldo de la Cruz wants a word with him. The judge asks the doctor about Archibaldo, and he replies that he is a normal man, albeit a bit off kilter since the death of his wife. After pleasantries, Archibaldo admits that he was the nun's murderer. The judge reads him his rights and gets a stenographer to take down the statement. Archibaldo assents and starts to tell another story.



The Music Box Reemerges The camera cuts to Lavinia and her much older fiancé, Chucho, who are being attended by another clerk. This clerk shows the couple the music box. Archibaldo hears the familiar song and interrupts the sale. He begs the couple and the clerk to let him have the music box, as it belonged to his mother and has great sentimental value. The clerk agrees and says that he always likes to place objects with owners who have a personal connection to it. Lavinia and Chucho leave, and the clerk laments the loss of a sale. Archibaldo thanks both clerks for their time. After he leaves, one clerk asserts that it is good to give decent people the benefit of the doubt. The other clerk agrees, provided that the fellow is a decent rich person and not poor.



Archibaldo's Comfortable Lifestyle Archibaldo carries the music box home and greets his servants. The butler reminds him that he has a date for tea time with Mrs. Cervantes, and Archibaldo replies that he hasn't forgotten. The butler also reports that Archibaldo's neighbor is complaining about the smoke from his artist workshop, and Archibaldo replies that he will not change his process over a neighbor's complaints. The butler brings Archibaldo a new cream-colored shirt, but instead of changing for tea, Archibaldo plays the music box and gazes at the ceramic ballerina obsessively.



Blood Fantasy Archibaldo is shaving when he suddenly cuts himself. He looks at the drop of blood on his finger, and a screeching variation of the music box tune sounds in his head. The music and the sight of blood provoke a flashback of the image of the dead governess. This time, however, the blood does not merely trickle from her temple but rather pours out of her exposed thigh. A stream of blood also appears running down the lens of the camera itself. When another servant interrupts his shaving, Archibaldo comes out of his trance and gets ready for the tea time visit.



PATRICIA

First Encounter with Patricia As he approaches the Cervantes house, Archibaldo is confronted by Patricia. She asks whether he remembers her, and he admits that he doesn't. She flirts with Archibaldo until her boyfriend, Willy, pulls up and honks at her. She sticks out her tongue and bids farewell to Archibaldo, saying that her tyrant has arrived. Before leaving, she reminds Archibaldo that they have seen each other in the casino. She invites him to the grand reopening later that night. As she gets into the car, Patricia notices that Archibaldo is looking at her legs. She laughs maniacally, much to Willy's chagrin.



Patricia Fights with her boyfriend at the Casino Patricia and Willy are sitting at the table playing craps at the casino's re-opening, and Patricia is begging him for money to keep playing. She takes off her high heeled shoes and brags about how valuable they are. When Willy refuses to give her more money, Patricia asks Archibaldo and starts flirting with him. Willy and Patricia go to the adjoining room and start arguing about Patricia's behavior; Archibaldo hides near a curtain and eavesdrops. Willy breaks up with Patricia, and she vows vengeance. Archibaldo follows Patricia as she leaves the club and starts to drive Willy's car. She crashes into a brick wall. Archibaldo runs to her aide and assesses her injuries. She replies that her knee is sore, but she is ok. Archibaldo suggests that they take his car to her apartment, and she flirtatiously agrees. On the ride over, Patricia rests her head on Archibaldo's chest and confesses that she thinks about suicide. Archibaldo asks about her life and tells her he is picking up something at his house. He goes in and grabs another one of the knives from the satchel.



Imagining Patricia's Murder When they arrive at Patricia's apartment, Archibaldo looks outside while Patricia changes in the other room. He notices a wall of pictures of ex-boyfriends and celebrities, including a body builder, matador, and John Wayne. Patricia emerges in lingerie but asserts that she doesn't necessarily intend to seduce him. She offers him a drink, and Archi asks for milk instead. When she goes into the kitchen, Archibaldo has a vision of her murder: as she brings out the glass of milk, he approaches her and starts to kiss her. Then, he slits her throat with his knife and she falls to the ground. The fantasy is filled with smoke and contains close-ups of Patricia's face and Archibaldo's wild eyes.

Reconciliation Archibaldo puts on gloves in preparation for the murder, but he is interrupted by Willy. Willy confronts Patricia, and they quickly make up. They explain to Archibaldo that they have always had a tumultuous relationship, and they invite Archibaldo to stay and drink his milk with them. Willy and Patricia start kissing and reminiscing, and Archibaldo graciously leaves the house.



3rd Death: Patricia's Suicide The next morning, a detective enters Archibaldo's workshop and questions him about his relationship with Patricia. He ultimately reveals that Patricia was probably murdered. The camera cuts to the apartment, where investigators are interrogating Willy and examining the body. Willy admits that they had a nasty fight after Archibaldo left, and the cops find a suicide note in which Patricia curses Willy for their toxic relationship. The cops agree that it is an "open and shut" case.



CARLOTA

Visit with the Cervantes Archibaldo enters the Cervantes's living room as Alejandro, the architect, is examining the walls. Before he leaves, Alejandro indicates his interest in Carlota, but Mrs. Cervantes rebuffs him. In contrast, Carlota's mother welcomes Archibaldo and compliments the ceramic container he made as a gift. Archibaldo walks into a small chapel in the house and catches Carlota praying. She thanks him for the gift and places it on the Virgin's altar. Archibaldo explains that he is concerned about his urges and his inclinations towards committing crimes. Carlota suggests that Archibaldo has too much time alone to obsess, and she invites him to visit more often. Mrs. Cervantes interrupts their conversation and tells Carlota that they need to go visit a sick friend.



Flirtation at the Club Archi decides to go to a club with a fire motif: there is an altar for the Virgin Mary in the corner, flaming shots, and a fire pit in the other corner. Suddenly, Archibaldo spots Lavinia in the corner laughing, and her face is illuminated by the flames. Lavinia continues her job as a guide for an American couple—she describes the history of the bar, claiming it was a convent. When she sees Archibaldo, Lavinia chats with him flirtatiously and whistles the tune from the music box. Archi struggles to suppress his alarm. When Chucho, Lavinia's fiancé, enters the club, Lavinia gives Archibaldo the address to the shop where she works. Chucho chides her for flirting with Archibaldo.



Proposing to Carlota Archibaldo visits the Cervantes house and proposes to Carlota in the parlor. He explains that she can “save” him from “disaster” and that he can provide her with a comfortable life. Carlota vacillates and says she needs a couple of months to think it over. Archibaldo thinks that she does not like him, but she assures him that this is not the case.

Breaking up with Alejandro Carlota visits Alejandro at his architectural office and tells him that she is ending the relationship. Alejandro protests, vowing to repair the damage he caused her. Alejandro retorts that she is only breaking up with him because Archibaldo proposed to her, or because she no longer loves him. Carlota reaffirms her love but insists that they separate. Alejandro grabs her forcefully and says that he will not give in to losing her forever.



Accepted Proposal Carlota and her mother visit Archibaldo at his estate, and Carlota indicates that she will accept his proposal of marriage. Archibaldo expresses joy at the thought of a new life. Mrs. Cervantes is overcome with emotion and declares that Archibaldo is a good man who deserves the best. Archibaldo consoles her but notices the high-heeled shoe of the mannequin on the floor. He quickly kicks it under the couch.

Alejandro's Sabotage The camera cuts to Archibaldo overseeing preparations for the wedding. He receives a letter from Alejandro warning him that Carlota is not as virtuous as she seems. He watches from the outside of the architectural office where Carlota enters and kisses Alejandro. Inside, Alejandro tries to dissuade Carlota again from getting married. Carlota asserts that it is her last chance to live an honorable life. Alejandro warns her that “something” will stop the wedding.

Imagined Wedding Night We hear the music box song and see smoke rising, and the fantasy of Carlota's murder begins. Archibaldo imagines them in their wedding dress and tuxedo, respectively, and Archibaldo reminds Carlota of the discussion where he confessed his criminal inclinations. Archibaldo exhorts Carlota to kneel and pray out loud with her hands interlocked. Carlota recites a Hail Mary while Archibaldo paces. There is an abrupt cut to Carlota's frightened face as she cries out, then another cut to Archi standing with a gun. He shoots her, and she falls on the wedding bed, dead.



4th Death: The Wedding Reception The camera cuts to the real wedding day where workers are unloading a multi-tiered wedding cake. The guests are inside chatting right after the ceremony. Two cops mention how much they enjoy the pomp and ceremony of a wedding, and the priest listening asserts that the Catholic Church incites those emotions. He explains that a civil wedding is too prosaic and dry, and the men agree that a traditional wedding always gives them a lump in their throat. The newlyweds enter and receive everyone's congratulations. The wedding photographer kneels to take a picture, and we see Carlota through the camera's lens. There is a quick cut to her startled face. She yells out "Alejandro, no!" right before a gunshot is fired.



2nd Confession Archibaldo describes his "tangential" murders and but he did not enact his own murderous fantasy. The judge asks him if he reads a lot of detective novelsthe judge explains that Archibaldo may have a homicidal tendency but he did not actually commit any crimes. If wishing someone dead were a crime, judges would never sleep. The judge dismisses Archibaldo and advises him to use an electric razor (as opposed to his knife collection) in order to avoid temptation.

LAVINIA

Visit to the Dress Shop Archibaldo listens to the music box obsessively and decides to pursue Lavinia. He shows up at the dress shop, but the clerk does not recognize Lavinia's name. While he waits for the owner, he notices that one of mannequins has an uncanny resemblance to Lavinia. Archibaldo asks to buy a replica of the mannequin. The camera closes in on the mannequin's face, then fades to a close-up of Lavinia's face as she poses for sculptors in an art class. Archibaldo catches Lavinia as she leaves the class. He asks her to come to his house to model for him, and she agrees.



Foreplay Before Murder While Archibaldo waits for Lavinia's arrival, he goes to a dresser in his bedroom and takes out women's stockings and underwear. He caresses a white bra. Lavinia rings the bell, and Archibaldo lets her in and complements her on her punctuality. He then guides her into the living room and shows her the mannequin replica he purchased. At first, Archibaldo plays off the mannequin as a gag. Lavinia also jokes about her "sister" but slaps Archibaldo's hand away when he starts to caress the mannequin's breasts. Archibaldo turns his erotic focus to Lavinia, who is sitting in a nearby chair. He strokes her hair and likens her to a witch sentenced to be burned, like Joan of Arc. Lavinia jumps up, uncomfortable, and asks him if she is there to work or to be petted. Archibaldo offers her a drink.



Choose One or the Other Archibaldo slips out to his workshop and turns up the temperature on the kiln. When he returns to the living room, he starts playing around with the mannequin again. This time, he lifts up the skirt and comments on the mannequin's exposed legs. Lavinia scolds him and says he needs to be with one girl or the other—but not both. Archibaldo tries to kiss Lavinia, and when she says no, he leans over to kiss the mannequin, then turns around and kisses Lavinia forcefully. She breaks the tension by suggesting they get to work. Archibaldo offers her the clothes he had been caressing before she arrived.



Near-Miss Strangulation Archibaldo goes into the adjoining room and sets the scene for his murder. He finds a cloth that will work well for strangulation. Lavinia enters in the same dress and belt as that on the mannequin. They drink wine and Lavinia starts thumbing through a photo album. While she is distracted, Archibaldo pulls the cloth tight and approaches her menacingly from behind. When the doorbell rings, the murder is interrupted and Archibaldo goes to answer the door. The gringo tourists appear on the patio, and Lavinia proceeds to give them a tour of the rich artist's mansion.



Archibaldo confronts Lavinia and becomes even more agitated when she confesses that she is about to get married. Lavinia guides the tourists out and declares that she will not see Archibaldo again.

Burning the Mannequin After Lavinia and the tourists leave, Archibaldo goes into the living room and strangles the mannequin. He lifts it up, then drags it (by its hair) out to his workshop. One of the high-heeled shoes remains on the floor in the living room. After a short drag, the left leg comes off of the mannequin (this one with the shoe still on it). Archibaldo picks up the leg, places it under his arm, and continues dragging the mannequin. He places the mannequin and the detached leg on the conveyer belt and starts it up. When the mannequin goes up in flames in the incinerator, Archibaldo watches transfixed from the window. The camera cuts to the mannequin's face as it melts and becomes a distorted mess, then back to a close-up of Archibaldo's excited eyes.



Reunion with Lavinia After Carlota dies, Archibaldo decides to get rid of the entrancing music box and throws it in a lake in a wooded area. Lavinia appears suddenly, and the two are surprised to see each other. Archibaldo asks her about her life. Lavinia reports that she left her jobs and did not marry Chucho. Archibaldo reminds her of the wisdom of a stable marriage, but Lavinia replies that she couldn't bear Chucho's jealousy. Archibaldo explains that he finally enjoys a "simple" life, and he offers to accompany Lavinia wherever she is going. The final shot is the couple walking arm in arm along the tree-lined path from behind



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

ARCHIBALDO

As a well-to-do artist, Archibaldo has the means and imagination to indulge his homicidal tendencies. The nature of his pathology is ambiguous, but it is clear that Archibaldo has some psychological disorder. He has a creative imagination that fosters both his ceramics and his murderous fantasies.

Charming Archibaldo behaves in a courteous and gallant manner, especially around women. For example, he deftly proposes to Carlota while also allowing her the space to reject him. He acts in a way that underscores his rich upbringing. He is also a good conversationalist and gracious host, and these qualities make it easy for him to attract and manipulate the women about whom he fantasizes. One notable example occurs in the casino: Archibaldo's willingness to stake Patricia (and later rescue her from the car wreck) convinces her to invite him to her apartment.

Psychopathic Although the judge shrugs off Archibaldo's violent imagination, the nature and persistence of his fantasies suggest that the protagonist does suffer from some mental illness. It could be interpreted as an oedipal complex gone too far or an overactive Id. However, Archibaldo's willingness to attempt murder physically (that is, almost stabbing the nun and almost strangling Lavinia) suggest that it is only a matter of time before he carries out a murder.

Privileged Due to his inherited wealth, Archibaldo has the freedom to work on his art, go antiquing, court Carlota, and indulge in various hobbies. His multiple servants keep the house running. His privilege also extends to his criminality—he gets away with the attempted murders even after confessing to the judge. Moreover, the majority of his would-be victims are women from the working class. As the antique store clerk remarks, he seems a "decent rich man," and therefore, everyone gives him the benefit of the doubt.

LAVINIA

Lavinia is a young, beautiful, working-class woman who attracts Archibaldo's attention. She is a people person who works with costumers and tourists on a regular basis. She is resourceful and practical.

Amiable Despite her multiple jobs, Lavinia projects a joyful and playful attitude towards life. She enjoys little pleasures such as the beauty of the antiques or the warmth of the fire at the club. She is very

friendly with Archibaldo and is easy to get along with. When Archibaldo is harassing her in his living room, she is able to quickly diffuse the situation and re-direct the focus towards modeling.

Industrious Lavinia works several jobs simultaneously: she is a guide for gringo tourists, a store clerk, and an artist's model. While she doesn't particularly enjoy any of them, she seems to be adept at juggling multiple responsibilities. She uses her modeling job as an opportunity to create a tour for the Oklahoma tourists, and this double-booking ends up saving her life (the attempted strangulation is interrupted by the tourists' arrival).

PATRICIA

Patricia is the low-class gold digger who dates Willy for his money, although her supposed suicide also suggests that she sincerely loves her older boyfriend. She acts self-assuredly, yet there is also a fragility that is revealed when she can no longer bear her current lifestyle.

Vulgar Patricia lacks social graces and tact. She openly insults people and laughs inappropriately. She also mistreats Willy by flirting with other men in front of him, and she breaks up with him in public. In a particularly gouache moment at the craps table, Patricia takes off her expensive high heels and thrusts them in the face of a fellow gambler.

Honest Unlike Carlota, Patricia does not attempt to project a virtuous or virginal image to the world. She asks for what she wants in the moment, and she says what she thinks without a filter. When she allows Archi to enter her apartment, she directly states that she is not trying to seduce him. She also openly discusses her relationship with Willy and former boyfriends.

CARLOTA

Carlota is Archibaldo's fiancée and briefly, wife, who comes from an upper-middle class family. Her character is somewhat two-faced in that she projects a pure, demure image to Archibaldo and society, yet she has lived a long time as Alejandro's mistress.

Affected Carlota plays the part of a kind and naïve ingenue—especially when Archibaldo visits her. When the viewer first sees her, she is praying at a domestic altar, then graciously consoling Archibaldo. In reality, she is using Archibaldo for stability while she sleeps with Alejandro. In the last scenes of the film, Carlota appears in a fashionable white wedding dress, but the viewer sees her true form not only through Archibaldo's eyes, but also the multiple frames of the camera(s) (see the theme **Metaperformance and Metanarrative** below).

Practical Carlota knows that she will never be able to marry Alejandro, so she settles for Archibaldo. Mrs. Cervantes pushes her to accept Archibaldo's proposal multiple times. Carlota knows a marriage with the rich artist will secure her future, and she states this position directly to Alejandro both in his office and in their final tryst before her wedding day.

THEMES

SOCIETY

Class: Social Status Archibaldo incarnates the rich artist and represents a viable partner for Carlota, whose mother fixates on getting her daughter an appropriate husband. Along with his inherited wealth, Archibaldo represents the successful dandy of mid-twentieth-century Mexico. His family came out of the Mexican Revolution with their wealth intact, and Archibaldo can continue the posh family lineage even with the post-revolutionary disdain for wealth and pedigree. Although Archibaldo proposes to and eventually marries Carlota, he is also attracted to inappropriate women—inappropriate in large part due to their being working class or poor. Patricia behaves in a trashy fashion and is a gambling addict. Lavinia, while classier than Patricia, is positioned in a much lower class than Archibaldo. Her multiple jobs suggests that she has to work constantly to survive, and for the most part, she dislikes her work. In this sense, the women represent the working-class Mexican who did not benefit from the ideals of the Revolution nor from the promises of a thriving capitalistic Mexico at mid-century.

JUSTICE

Crime As the title of the film suggests, the action of the plot is Archibaldo's crimes. Yet, he only manages to commit them in his mind or by proxy. The central question turns on intention. Are Archibaldo's nefarious motivations enough to "convict" him of murder or manslaughter? His attempt to stab the nun certainly supports a charge of attempted murder. It is not so much the "criminal life" of Archibaldo, but rather the psychopathic and homicidal tendencies of all of the male characters in the film. The central crime is that of attempting to control or possess the female characters, then taking it upon oneself to "punish" the rebellious woman who disobeys or leaves her partner. We can assume that Alejandro is incarcerated for murdering Carlota, but Archibaldo escapes without justice for the victims. The judge rules that fantasy does not constitute a punishable crime.

Violence The concept of violence constitutes the connective tissue of the film: the male characters wish to control their female partners to the extent that they are willing to kill them. However, the violence of the murders throughout the film is more implied. Even when Archibaldo rehearses the murder in his mind, it is a largely stylized fantasy without blood, struggling, pain, etc. Unlike other Buñuel's early surrealist films or the later French satires, there are not very many overtly violent images in *Criminal Life*. The one notable exception are the shots of the governess's dead body in the early scenes of the film. We see the blood from her temple (and later, blood gushing out), and her legs lying in a peculiar fashion. This image of the dead governess comes from Archibaldo's young gaze, and we immediately see how he is eroticizing and fetishizing death. This rather mild characterization of violence sets the tone for the whole film as a stylized mystery novel in the vein of Raymond Chandler or a suspense film in the style of Alfred Hitchcock.

QUEST

Explore Because Archibaldo is an artist with means, he has the time and energy to fully indulge the fantasies of his troubled psyche. With each rehearsed murder, he is thinking about and planning the enactment of his oedipal complex and id. The planning stage becomes the psychological exploration due to the fact that he never manages to kill his would-be victims. Even his attempts to confess and be punished for the crimes is not successful. In this sense, the quest is for completion or recognition, but neither manifests itself. The psychopathy ends with Archibaldo's supposed conversion in Chapultepec Park, although the viewer may suspect that he will resume his exploration soon enough. Due to his open-ended criminality, literary critic Sydney Donnell likens Archibaldo's lust for murder and hunger for recognition to the imagined quests of Don Quixote. In both cases, the protagonists are men of leisure who are inspired by literature (Archibaldo by detective novels and Don Quixote by chivalric romances and tales), and both suffer from at least mild mental conditions. In addition, both men obsess over objects of desire but maintain a chaste distance. Despite the fact that the characters relinquish their quest at the end of the film and novel, respectively, both men could pick up their crazy adventures where they left off. In this sense, the quest never truly ends.

RELATIONSHIPS

Sexuality

Desire Archibaldo's desire is not so much about sex, but rather his attraction to the idea of each woman. The lack of actual penetration (either with a weapon or intercourse) could imply that Archibaldo is impotent, gay, a transvestite, or is struggling with a combination of repressed queer desires. Conversely, we could also interpret Archibaldo's desire for murder as an extension of his sexual attraction to each of his would-be victims. For this reason, his desire takes the form of violent fantasies. Many of the fantasies feature an erotic framing of the dead body—in particular, an emphasis on legs and necks. Archibaldo plays out this particular interest in the neck and legs by gazing at (and ultimately burning) the mannequin that looks like Lavinia. In addition, Archibaldo experiences attraction and arousal through the imagery of fire. His obsession with Lavinia, in particular, ends with seeing her face glowing above flames at the club and manifests itself in the incinerated mannequin. Alejandro, Carlota's lover, actually enacts his revenge by shooting Carlota on her wedding day. Although the other male characters are not as psychopathic or homicidal with their fantasies, they also show an obsessive desire to control their female counterparts. Both Willy and Chucho try to dominate Patricia and Lavinia, respectively.

Erotic Triangles With the exception of the nun in the hospital, each of Archibaldo's would-be victims is already involved with another man, and an inappropriate one at that. Lavinia and Patricia have opportunistic relationships with older men who try to control them. When Archibaldo intervenes as a younger, more charismatic alternative, the women consider him as an alternate for their chosen partners. As film critic Geoffrey Kantaris explains, Archibaldo continually reenacts an Oedipal longing by pursuing the women who "belong" to a substitute father figure. With regard to Carlota, Archibaldo plays the role of the rich, stable partner, with Alejandro as the obsessive and psychopathic lover. Carlota's anxiety originates in her position as the object of desire between two men. Although Archibaldo does not actually engage in the rivalries with the men, his attraction to the women is driven at least in part to the realization that they are already taken and therefore "forbidden fruit." Conversely, the women's partners are threatened by Archibaldo and do try to engage him in a rivalry.

Oedipal Complex It is hardly surprising that Archibaldo has psychopathic tendencies. However, it could be argued that Archi's fascination with murder is a manifestation of an enduring oedipal complex, as film critics Peter Evans and Geoffrey Kantaris, among others, assert. The first scene in the film is that of Archibaldo, as a boy, watching his parents get ready to go out to a party. He longs to hold on to his mother, but she leaves with his father instead. As a result, Archibaldo transfers the longing for his mother into the music box and its supposed magic powers. The power of the music box compels him to buy it from the antique shop as an adult. In addition, Archibaldo enacts a rivalry with the older lovers (Willy and Chucho) of Patricia and Lavinia, respectively. When the women go out with him, it is as though Archibaldo possesses his mother and defeats his father. Rather than sex, the ultimate possession of the women in Archibaldo's fantasies is causing their death.

Fetishism Like most of Buñuel's male protagonists, Archibaldo invests erotic meaning into objects, particularly when those objects constitute substitutes for the women whom he wishes to kill. The most obvious fetish is the mannequin modeled after Lavinia. He looks up the mannequin's skirt, reveals its legs, strangles it, and burns it. When the high-heeled shoe and leg come off of the mannequin, the "body" becomes even more eroticized and fetishized. Lavinia as a flesh and blood woman is also fetishized due to her presentational jobs. As a model, she is the inspiration for her artistic doppelgangers. Even her work as a guide suggests that she presents herself as exoticized version of Mexican womanhood for the tourists to enjoy. The music box becomes fetishized because it acts as a stand-in for Archibaldo's mother, hence his obsession with both the tune and the dancing ballerina on top. Archibaldo also wields weapons that have phallic symbolism: the knives and gun, in particular. Notably, he never gets the opportunity to use the weapons on the female bodies. There is also Archibaldo's walking cane that is largely ornamental; as yet another phallic prop, Archibaldo throws his cane into the woods of Chapultepec Park once he is "freed" of his homicidal tendencies. In this sense, the phallic objects remain impotent and ineffective. Finally, there is an emphasis on commodity fetishism in the modern and capitalistic society of Mexico in the 1950s. The characters buy and sell goods constantly, and they themselves become the "goods" on occasion.

PSYCHOLOGY

Imagination As the primary narrator, Archibaldo weaves his own story (or stories) throughout the film. Much of his narration is a confession of what he imagines, although there is also the attempted enactment of his fantasies. The origin of his psychopathy is the fairy tale that both his mother and the governess tell him. The story becomes the catalyst for Archibaldo's fascination with the music box, homicide, and the dead body of the governess. In fact, the mere thought of music box melody provokes the mental rehearsal of the murders. During the fantasy sequences, the murder is stylized rather than realistic: there is mist or fog and jarring close-ups to faces contorted in fear or sadism. Because of his vivid imagination and the other factors surrounding the deaths of the women in his life, the judge dismisses Archibaldo's homicidal tendencies as the result of an overactive imagination and reading too many mystery novels. Moreover, Archibaldo's ability to fantasize allows him to pretend as though he is killing Lavinia through the medium of the mannequin. Like a method actor, Archibaldo believes his own imagined circumstances. It could also be argued that Archibaldo's imagination enhances his creativity as a ceramic artist.

Metaperformance and Metanarrative As with many of Buñuel's films, *Criminal Life* plays with the concept of performance and performativity. The original title, "Rehearsal of a Crime," underscores the idea of Archibaldo's murderous fantasies as a performative effort. He is acting out the machinations of each murder in his mind. In the case of the nun and Lavinia, we could say that Archibaldo is performing a run-through that is interrupted by circumstance. The theatrical nature of Archibaldo's fantasies becomes more pronounced with his use of props: weapons, and most overtly, the mannequin. The psychopath "practices" strangulation on the mannequin in a very presentational manner. In the wedding scene, we see Carlota in the "crosshairs" through the lens of the photographer's camera—a frame within a frame. Along with the fantasy rehearsal scenes, Archibaldo's story is stitched together as a series of flashbacks within multiple narratives. In the early scenes, Archi is telling the nun about his childhood, yet the real flashback is "kicked off" by the voiceover Archi showing the book with the violent pictures of the Mexican Revolution. Within the childhood flashback, there is also the governess's story about the music box. Later, the recent flashbacks of Archi's adult life are wrapped up in Archibaldo's meta-narrative to the judge. As the audience, the judge is entertained and does not take the confession seriously. He even compares Archibaldo's story to *novelas de entrega* (mystery novels). The meta reference suggests that Usigli, Buñuel and Ugarte (the writers) admit their own reliance on crime novel or film noir tropes in the creation of the story. In this sense, the narratives and the performances are layered throughout the film.

APPEARANCE

Deception Nearly all the characters wear a social mask that hides their real desires and secrets. Obviously, Archibaldo manages to suppress his murderous fantasies temporarily and play the charming host and suitor. Some critics also suggest that Archibaldo is hiding a latent homosexuality, which is evidenced by his homicidal (but not necessarily erotic) attraction to women, his fetishistic obsession with female clothes and doppelgangers, his strange preference for milk over hard liquor, and his chivalrous attitude towards his girlfriends (rather than sexual conquest or sexual encounters). His performance is convincing in that the women enjoy his company; moreover, Mrs. Cervantes considers him the perfect mate for Carlota. Although Patricia states her desires and complaints overtly, the other female characters vacillate and equivocate. Carlota pretends to be chaste and pious to secure Archibaldo, but she is really Alejandro's mistress. Lavinia performs multiple versions of herself not only for Chucho and Archibaldo, but also as part of her jobs. She becomes the literal object of the gaze as a model, and she creates a persona that is amenable to the gringo tourists. In the end, both Archibaldo and Lavinia tire of their constant performances and vow to be true to themselves. The implication is that all Mexicans in the post-revolutionary and post-WWII period participate in the fast-moving, capitalistic society of the period, and survival often depends upon deception and a willingness to submit to social norms.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Why does Archibaldo get away with attempted murder?
2. Do you think Archibaldo is truly reformed at the end of the film? Will he end up killing Lavinia later?
3. Comment on the effect of stories within narratives within flashbacks. What is the purpose of such a "meta" structure?
4. How is Buñuel influenced by Hitchcock's style in this film? How is Usigli (the writer) influenced by detective novels and film noir?
5. In your opinion, which title—"Rehearsal of a Crime" or "The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz"—better reflects the plot and tone of the film?
6. What is the effect of starting the film with scenes and descriptions of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920)?
7. Notice that the same melody (just a few bars) of the music box tune are played numerous times throughout the film, but often with different instruments, variations, keys, tempos, and sound effects. How does the music enhance the style and tone of the film?