his political position, has a sudden fit of spasmodic pain in a restaurant. The need for food is subverted by less direct needs in both men. Laborit speaks of the need to dominate one’s own world, and the need to aggress when one can’t dominate; Janine can invade Jean’s private domain (even if she’s rebuffed there) but the corporate world can’t be dominated at all. Corporate mores reward those who adapt to corporate frustration, and react accordingly—the “aggressive businessman,” the “aggressive exec”—but neither René nor Jean are fit to survive in this bureaucratic cage, and Janine survives only by finding her sorrows elsewhere.

It’s indubitably tragic. It’s also, in its way, quite funny, finding its odd humor in the tension between the complexity of life and the simplicity of scientific theory. Comedy relies on distance: Resnais alternates between a close-up view of human anguish, and the witty distancing of intercut footage of old-time movie stars and amusing animals. The humor is that of a momentary relief from tragedy, with the tragic events seen from a sudden, new, capricious perspective. The showy playfulness of the filmic style serves as a deliberate alienating device: Resnais clearly intends to present a reality free from the roseate banalities of the average fictional film, and he pulls back into wit and structure so that his reality will be bearable.

The style is a revival of the bittersweet fun-and-misery mixture of Truffaut’s Shoot the Piano Player (in fact, Resnais even casts Piano Player’s Marie Dubois as Depardieu’s sympathetic wife) and its piquant pleasures are similar. When there’s nothing but agony left for the characters, there’s still the consolation, for the viewers, of a fresh and exquisite structure, mathematical in its purity and detachment, and musical in its grace.

The title sounds deceptively humorous in French: “my uncle from America” must be some indulgent, awkward, shambling fellow (played perhaps, by Fernandel, or Belmondo, or Michel Simon) caught in the clash of cultural sources is the ability to present this tale from multiple perspectives. Although it reaffirms the ennobling power of the romance, the film acknowledges all of the other possibilities inherent in the material, which creates a rich mixture of tones—comic, tragic, romantic and ironic.

On one level, Don Alejandro can be seen as another Don Quixote—with the young Goyita as his Dulcinea, his earthy friend Father Eladio as his Sancho Panza, a beautiful white horse as his Rozinante, and a crotchety but loyal middle-aged housekeeper who tries to keep him at home. The old age of this imaginative

...for Henri Laborit:

“America doesn’t exist. I know. I lived there.”
—NAOMI WISE

**EL NIDO (THE NEST)**

*El Nido*, 1980, is the second film by Jaime De Armiñán to be nominated for an Oscar for the Best Foreign Film (the first was *Mi Querida Señorita* in 1973), yet his work is virtually unknown in this country because it has not yet received distribution. It has been seen only in festivals and in special showings.* The loss is ours for Armiñán is a mature talent who expresses himself with equal brilliance both in writing and directing.

Born in Madrid, Armiñán began his career as a playwright, winning the two most prestigious dramatic prizes in Spain—the Calderón de la Barca and the Lope de Vega. He then moved to television where his work was awarded the Golden Nymph of Monte Carlo and the Golden Rose of Montreux. He turned to cinema in the seventies. After *Mi Querida Señorita* (*My Dearest Señorita*), he wrote and directed *El Amor del Capitan Brando* (*The Love of Capt. Brando*), *Nunca Es Tarde* (*Never Too Late*), and *Al Servicio de la Mujer Española* (*At the Service of the Spanish Woman*).

His latest film *El Nido* (*The Nest*) is extremely original though it consciously evokes two Renaissance classics—Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* and Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. It is a sophisticated love story about a rich, eccentric old widower named Don Alejandro and an extraordinarily precocious 13-year-old girl named Goyita Mendez. What it shares with its Renaissance sources is the ability to present this tale from multiple perspectives. Although it reaffirms the ennobling power of the romance, the film acknowledges all of the other possibilities inherent in the material, which creates a rich mixture of tones—comic, tragic, romantic and ironic.

For example, *El Nido* had its American premiere at Filmex (1981) and was also screened recently by the Institute for Hispanic Media and Culture at the University of Southern California.
Don is greatly enriched by a romantic quest that is both dangerous and ennobling and that ends up costing his life, which he willingly forfeits. Though he is described by others as "ridiculous, crazy, an asshole, and a sex-maniac," this chivalric adventure enables him to truly love for the first time, it makes his relationships with others richer and more honest, and it gives his life transcendent meaning.

The film is simultaneously set against The Tragedy of Macbeth. The first time both we in the audience and our hero Don Alejandro see Goyita, she is rehearsing her role as Lady Macbeth for a school performance. Throughout the film both characters quote crucial lines from the play. For example, in the scene where Goyita persuades Don Alejandro to make a secret blood pact, in which they carve each other's initials on their palms, at the moment that he complies, he holds out his hand, closes his eyes and recites: "It will have blood they say, blood will have blood." Though he intends Macbeth's line to be playfully ironic in this context, it turns out to be prophetic.

Goyita is the true aggressor in the romance. She captures and enchants Alejandro and imposes a series of demands, leading up to her insistence that he murder her arch enemy—the Police Sergeant who is her father's boss. Like Lady Macbeth, she is a powerful female who manipulates one man into killing another. Both killer and victim are traditional patriarchs functioning for her as father surrogates. Her tragic prototype also saw a resemblance between her own father and the man she persuaded her husband to murder: "Had he not resembled My father as he slept, I had don't." (II,ii,12-13) Younger and stronger than Lady Macbeth, Goyita is a survivor who profits from the relationship with Alejandro both materially and emotionally.

The film's intertextuality extends far beyond the Renaissance, linking the heroine by her name both to the revolutionary spirit of Goya (she refuses to be limited by her age, class and sex and succeeds in rebelling against her oppressors) and to Nabokov's crass little nymphet Lolita (Goyita makes Don Alejandro burn his wife's possessions and leave his estate to her). She also evokes the romantic bird girl Rima from Hudson's Green Mansions and other variations of La Belle Dame Sans Merci. Though she makes the Don acknowledge the sexual dimension of their relationship (in one scene, she asks him directly whether he likes her "as a woman" and then tells him he may kiss her), their romance is never sexually consummated.

In the early stages, the affair stimulates Don Alejandro to visit his mistress in Salamanca much earlier than usual; later, when he becomes totally immersed in his romantic obsession, he loses interest in this other woman and in sex. Repeatedly, Goyita forces him to treat her as an adult. Whenever he makes a remark that is in any way patronizing, she says "Adios" and turns to leave, causing him to run after
her, apologize and acknowledge her equality. Rather than being sexual in nature, her power is primarily based on a precocious intelligence, authoritarianism and intensity, which almost seem tinged with the supernatural. She possesses a spiritual fire that is capable of fueling any kind of passion. We might even suspect that she, like Lady Macbeth, has symbolic affinities with Shakespeare’s weird sisters. When the school teacher confides in Don Alejandro that she chose Goyita to play Lady Macbeth, because “she’s wicked enough to understand the part,” he observes: “I’ve always thought that women were more intelligent than men . . . and more evil.”

Despite these demonic dimensions, Goyita is simultaneously presented as a young adolescent full of typical romantic fantasies, playing the same games familiar to most children, but transforming them with her extraordinary passion. Just as the eccentric Don Alejandro walks the line between madness and romantic idealism, the willful Goyita obscures the boundary between egotistical child’s play and obsessive romantic tragedy. Freud saw child’s play and adult daydreaming as two precursors of artistic creativity, the latter being exchanged for the former as the person matured. But they both differed from conscious artistry in leaving the egotistic wish-fulfillment (which was either ambitious or erotic) very transparent.

“The writer softens the character of his egoistic daydreams by altering and disguising it, and he bribes us by the purely formal—that is, aesthetic—yield of pleasure which he offers us in the presentation of his fantasies. We give the name of an incentive bonus, or a forepleasure, to a yield of pleasure such as this, which is offered to us so as to make possible the release of still greater pleasure arising from deeper psychical sources.”

Armiñán’s achievement in El Nido is to couple child’s play with adult fantasy, allowing the ambitious, erotic and egotistic wish-fulfillments to remain fully transparent as they do in Don Quixote and Macbeth, yet redeeming the union through a masterful aesthetic control that is equally apparent. Both his hero and heroine strive for artistic expression: Don Alejandro fantasizes he is a conductor, while Goyita is a budding poet and actress. But, of course, it is Armiñán, himself, who provides the film’s consummate artistry, which is expressed primarily through rigorous and economical narrative structure, witty and resonant dialogue, subtle characterizations developed through brilliant acting, dynamic camera movement, and patterns of recurring images that are visual, verbal, musical and narrative. The result is a very powerful film that arouses considerable pleasure, both of the aesthetic and psychic varieties, by fusing art and nature.

With the energy of an overture and with great virtuosity, the opening sequences combine all of these techniques to launch the plot and introduce the central conflict between art and nature. The opening image is a long shot of an idyllic landscape. A white horse, which will later come to represent Don Alejandro’s spirit of chivalry, runs in the center of the frame, with white clouds in the sky and a symmetrical line of trees at the horizon. As we listen to Haydn’s “The Creation” on the sound track, we watch the natural subject and camera move together harmoniously as if in a dance. Then the camera slowly pans right to a large house; as it moves in for a closer shot, we see through the window a silhouette of Don Alejandro vigorously conducting. The image dissolves to successively closer shots of the house until the window through which we are peering takes over the entire frame, focusing our attention on art and making the natural landscape disappear.

Nature reappears in the next sequence as we watch Don Alejandro riding the white horse through the same woods from the opening shot. This time we hear natural sounds rather than music—a running brook and chirping birds. As soon as Alejandro removes his hat and begins to conduct, the same music from the opening sequence takes over the sound track; once again, art dominates nature, which seems to give the Don great pleasure. The camera continually moves, performing lyrical circular pans, cutting from dizzying upward angles to symmetrical shots of the conductor framed by trees. As if the Spirit of the Woods were getting its revenge, an egg suddenly splatters on Alejandro’s forehead, bringing the music to a sudden halt and comically deflating his performance. Yet it also marks the birth of his romantic quest, leading him to search for the culprit who threw the egg; the camera joins the hunt, representing his subjective point of view as he rummages through the bushes. Eventually he finds a red scarf hanging on a branch, and the camera pulls back to give us a broader perspective on this momentous discovery.

The cut to the next scene occurs on a zoom into the house, as if the camera were very eager to catch the next move in the game. Again we see through the window Don Alejandro conducting, but now we hear birds singing rather than Haydn’s chorale. When the Don’s gestures are deprived of the musical track, they become comical. This deflation is carried even
further once we get inside and see that he is performing in front of a tape deck, revealing he is only an imaginary conductor, not a real artist. This time his number is interrupted by an electronic buzzer, which signals that it is time for him to make his next move in a computerized game of chess. We realize that he is a lonely old man, filling his time with idle games of rational control. Yet we do not feel sorry for him because of his extraordinary intensity and pleasure in pursuing these activities and his total acceptance of and contentment with his solitude. These are precisely the values he will have to sacrifice for his romantic adventure, but they also display his qualifications for the role of tragic hero in the quest. The film’s first line of dialogue is spoken to the machine and prefigures his double identification with Quixote, the Knight-errant, and Macbeth, who would be King: “Ah the King, I see what you’re up to, but I won’t fall into your trap . . . . you didn’t count on the Knight!” Turning from the chessboard to the scarf, he discovers an initial “G” and asks, “And who are you?” When his housekeeper enters the room, she interrupts his fantasy and provokes an irritable tirade. It is obvious that he prefers his symbolic objects to human companionship. She retorts, “If your wife were alive!,” and the computer signals his next move, which is checkmate.

In the next sequence Don Alejandro sallies forth into the woods wearing the red scarf and searching for new love tokens. Much to his delight, he finds a series of clues that combine art and nature—a feather attached to a note bearing a cryptic rhyme and leading him on to the next sign. The third one reads: “The feather of a sparrow hawk/Will take you to the Tower walk.” Not only do these notes provide the first description of Goyita (who looks like a sparrow but acts like a hawk), they also develop the bird imagery beyond the egg and foreshadow that Don Alejandro will have to pay dearly for this knight-errantry. In recovering one of the tokens, he falls into the river, which will later result in a terrible cold. Instead of being dismayed, he breaks into a huge grin that takes over his entire face and moves between idiocy and ecstasy. Rising from the river with grandeur, he dramatically and prophetically proclaims: “With 100 cannons on either side, full sail ahead!” Our hero is fully launched on the greatest adventure of his life, but it will end with his being cut down by machine-gun fire.

Two subsequent sequences illustrate the wonderful resonance and economy of Armi-

ñán’s dialogue, narrative structure and mise en scène. In the first, Don Alejandro goes to visit his friend Eladio, a Catholic priest, asking him to analyze the handwriting in the notes. As he enters the church, Alejandro hears the sound of tolling bells. Winding his way into an interior chamber, he finds the priest reading, with religious icons in the background and thin streams of light piercing his cigarette smoke, creating a heavy atmosphere and amber texture that are almost painterly. This choice of mise en scène gives a sacred cast to Alejandro’s quest, as if the mystery and passion he pursues are a substitute for salvation. But the ironic dialogue deflates the beauty of the setting and begins to characterize each man and define their relationship.

ALEJANDRO: Hello, witch doctor.
ELADIO: Hello, heretic.
ALEJANDRO: Is this what they call the air of sanctity?

Symbolically Alejandro’s greeting may cast Eladio in the role of the witches in the parallel with Macbeth. More realistically, however, the exchange reveals the same kind of relationship that Alejandro has with his housekeeper—a teasing antagonism that covers a mutual respect and affection based on years of friendship. These greetings also inform us that Alejandro is a nonbeliever, creating a philosophical tension with his friend that parallels the opposition between Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. Like the housekeeper, Eladio deflates his friend’s romantic quest by reminding him of his age. Ignoring this sarcasm, Alejandro presents Eladio with a box of candy, to which the priest responds: “It’s the first time you gave me anything—are they poisoned?” Not only does the gift reveal the sensual side of Eladio’s nature, which will be developed in later scenes and will help to qualify him for his role as Sancho, but it also shows how Alejandro’s quest has already brought him out of his solitude and forced him to acknowledge his need for others, a realization that makes him more open and generous.

This sequence is also masterful in its hermeneutic function of providing us with dramatic exposition yet simultaneously heightening our curiosity about the mysterious heroine whom we have not yet seen. Eladio’s analysis of her handwriting is comic yet prophetic in every detail. He tells us she is very young, hungry and dirty (he knows this because one of the notes is stained with salami), uncouth but gifted with a natural intelligence and a great sense of humor, authoritarian, headstrong, sensitive, passionate and possessive.
Even Eladio’s curiosity is engaged, for it is he who deciphers the sparrow hawk’s riddle and in the next scene leads Alejandro to the church tower. Despite his teasing skepticism, he has joined the Don’s quest, like a faithful squire, and is the first to discover and decode the next prophetic message: “The greenfinch’s flow/Will end up in a tragic show.” Once deciphered, this note serves as an invitation to the school rehearsal of Macbeth, where the heroine makes her dramatic debut in one of the most brilliant sequences in the film.

As Don Alejandro sneaks into the school auditorium, we hear a young girl reciting a soliloquy. Though the husky adolescent voice occasionally cracks with uncertainty, it expresses a full understanding of the words it speaks.

The raven himself is hoarse
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan
Under my battlements. Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full
Of direst cruelty! (I,v,39-44)

The choice of passage is brilliant, for Armiñana makes the lines fit the film’s context while retaining the demonic resonance of Shakespeare’s tragedy. The opening allusion to the raven marks the speech as the climactic note that lures Alejandro into the romance. The allusion to the “fatal entrance of Duncan” just as the Don enters the room foreshadows that he, rather than the sergeant, will die. When the camera cuts to Goyita on stage in a blood-red sweater, we are simultaneously struck by the childishness of her body and the mature intelligence expressed in her eyes. Don Alejandro gapes at her in wonder. She seems acutely aware of his presence as soon as he enters the room, so much so that the teacher has to interrupt the speech to remind her, “You’re waiting for Macbeth.” As Goyita resumes the soliloquy, the camera intercuts between her and Alejandro, quickening in pace and moving closer in each time, as if they were the only ones present. Clearly she is playing the scene to him, completing her romantic conquest and casting him in the role of her murderous mate. Later, when Alejandro speaks to her in the school courtyard, he will signal his acceptance of both roles (as her lover and Macbeth) by quoting lines from the play: “Sleep no more, Macbeth does murder sleep.” But while still in the auditorium, their romantic enchantment is broken by a cut to an extreme long shot of the stage, as the teacher coaches the little pipsqueak playing Macbeth to make his entrance, informing Goyita, “Macbeth is here!” Goyita continues to stare directly at Don Alejandro, fighting to maintain the spell of their private play and ignoring the deflating giggles of her childish peers.

It’s an extraordinary acting performance by Ana Torrent. Though Héctor Alterio is also brilliant as Don Alejandro, as is Luis Poltti in the supporting role of Eladio, it is conceivable that other actors could have done equally well. The case is different with Ana Torrent; it is almost impossible to imagine this film without her because her very existence proves that such a young girl is capable of such intelligence and passion. The creation of Goyita is a marvellous collaboration between Torrent and Armiñana (both as writer and director). He must have had Torrent in mind when he conceived of the role, for her earlier performances in Victor Erice’s El Espíritu de la Colmena (Spirit of the Beehive), 1973, and Carlos Saura’s Cria Cuervos (Raise Ravens), 1975, were equally stunning and also demanded that she combine a precocious emotional maturity with a fascination for the demonic.

The character of Goyita depends on a balance between Torrent’s uniqueness and the mythic resonance of the games, codes and icons with which she is aligned. In case we don’t perceive the extraordinary nature of the performance given by Torrent as Goyita, Armiñana powerfully dramatizes her irreplaceability in a later sequence that occurs after she has been sent out of town by her family. Again, Don Alejandro visits a rehearsal at the school auditorium, but this time the role of Lady Macbeth is played by Pilar, the teacher’s favorite and Goyita’s arch rival. Though she is also intelligent, Pilar totally lacks Goyita’s emotional maturity and passion. She delivers the soliloquy mechanically, as if it were an exercise in rote memory without any understanding of the lines. Even the teacher is frustrated and threatens to “break her neck” if she doesn’t slow down. The contrast forces us to realize that without Goyita, the school play is silly and meaningless; Don Alejandro comes to exactly the same conclusion about his life. Without having to hear the actual lines quoted, we are reminded of the most famous passage from Macbeth—the King’s reaction to the loss of his Lady.

Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing. (V,v,23-28)

This scene helps Don Alejandro decide to challenge the police sergeant and makes him totally indifferent to his own death.
In *El Nido* the subtlety of characterization and narrative development is frequently enhanced by camera moves and editing. We have already seen how this principle worked in the opening sequences, but it is most effective in two parallel scenes that develop the relationships between Goyita and her teacher and between Don Alejandro and the priest far beyond our conventional expectations.

The first scene occurs immediately after the teacher has discovered the initial "A" carved on Goyita's palm. Attractive, intelligent, and in her early twenties, the teacher is clearly a potential rival. She has been acutely aware of Don Alejandro's interest in Goyita and has even gone to visit him to find out more about his relationship with her pupil. Her motives seem to be mixed: a teacher's moral duty, a maternal interest in the girl, and personal jealousy. Aware of the potential rivalry and used to bitter power struggles with her own mother, Goyita has forbidden Don Alejandro to visit the school or speak to the teacher. The scene opens with a medium shot of the teacher painting trees on the sets for the play. When Goyita comes to help her, the teacher proposes a game designed to discover the nature of her relationship with Don Alejandro, yet this catechism is presented in the spirit of courtly romance: they will take turns asking each other questions, but always have to tell the truth and cannot reveal the answers to anyone else. Goyita gladly accepts the challenge, deftly showing how she can turn the game to her own advantage and use it to prove her intellectual and emotional equality with the teacher. At the beginning of the game we watch the two young women in long shot, but as the questions draw them into greater intimacy and our own involvement intensifies, the camera keeps moving in closer.

**Goyita:** Who's your favorite?
**Teacher:** Pilar.
**Goyita:** Pilar Campos is an idiot!
**Teacher:** Why don't you like school?
**Goyita:** I don't like to be cooped up. . . . Do you dislike me?
**Teacher:** No, I love you. Who is the A?
**Goyita:** You already know. Alejandro. What's going to be on the exam?

The questions and camera moves control the subtle modulation of tone. From poignant questions and honest answers that reveal her vulnerability—her sibling rivalry with Pilar (reflecting her relationship with her younger sister), her desire for the teacher's love (to compensate for the open hostility that exists between her and her mother), her identification with caged birds—Goyita moves to a devious question about the exam, which temporarily re-establishes the adversarial student-teacher relationship, reminds us that she is still a rebellious child, and makes the camera pull back to a more detached view. After grudgingly answering this question, the teacher resumes her pursuit of the truth she seeks. Now that Goyita has forced her to acknowledge the purpose behind the game, the girl is free to ask equally personal questions and the camera continues to move in for more intimate close-ups.

**Teacher:** Does he have a G?
**Goyita:** Yes. Why did you go to see him?
**Teacher:** I wanted to see if he was bad. What do you do?
**Goyita:** Talk, play, he tells me things. We listen to music, ride bikes, nothing else, I swear it. . . . Do you have a boyfriend?
**Teacher:** I'm living with someone. . . .

At this moment of peak closeness, student and teacher have become equals, like two girl friends of the same age trading intimate secrets. The camera suddenly pulls back to an extreme long
shot at a slightly downward angle, reminding us of the theatrical setting and how the scene began as a game. We see that Goyita’s power works not only on Don Alejandro, but on anyone with imagination and intelligence. From this comic overview, we then return to a closer shot of the specific situation—a warning and a confession about the tragic romance that shift the tone and call attention to context, foreboding the worst for Alejandro.

**Teacher:** In a western, they’d lynch him. Be careful.

**Goyita:** We’ve broken up . . . because he doesn’t do as I say.

The parallel scene between Don Alejandro and Eladio takes place in the churchyard immediately after the former has seen Pilar rehearsing Lady Macbeth. Like the scene between Goyita and the teacher, it is structured as a mutual confession, revealing deep similarities between the two men who originally seemed to be such opposites and a deeper love than we expected. Eladio teasingly greets his friend as “Judas” and quips, “You and I will end up in marriage!” Alejandro’s confession moves through several stages and tones, with the camera moving in for greater intimacy and out for comical distance. The first stage is pure romantic melancholy. Presented in a medium shot, Alejandro confesses that he is lost and the priest tries to interest him in trout fishing, but the Don is interested in nothing but Goyita. The tone turns humorous when Alejandro confesses that he spent five years in a seminary and found “your colleagues were really animals!” Finding this revelation hysterically funny, Eladio makes him try on his robes and recite a prayer so that he can see how Alejandro would look as a priest. It’s the same kind of reversal of roles that occurs in Part II of Don Quixote. When the camera pulls back to the proper comic distance for such buffoonery, it also reminds us that the setting is a graveyard. As if to signal a theatrical shift in tone, there is a sudden crack of thunder, which the priest playfully interprets as a divine condemnation of their blasphemy or as Alejandro’s “holy ministers.” The tone becomes more somber and the camera moves in for an intimate two-shot as Alejandro assesses his life and reveals that his marriage was a mistake, that the romance with Goyita is his first and only love, that he intends to leave her for fortune, and that Eladio is his only friend. The priest responds with a sincere blessing that functions as wise counsel, a true declaration of loving friendship, and the final rites of extremeunction. “Let me tell you something, really. You’re the best person I know. I bless you in the name of the father, the son and the holy ghost. . . . You go to Salamanca.”

We realize that we have been listening to the final confession of an atheist, whose soul has been redeemed by friendship and love and who now is preparing to face his death. Alejandro replies to the priest: “There’s nothing for me in Salamanca or anywhere!”

The richness of the film is also developed through recurring images which work visually, verbally, narratively and musically. Perhaps the most significant image pattern is birds, which are evoked in the film’s title, the sound track of the opening sequences, and in the first quotation from Macbeth. Goyita gains much of her power by being a bird girl, a romantic child of nature—by gathering nests, by being able to distinguish feathers and songs of every species, by identifying with all kinds of birds whether caged or wild, by throwing an egg and composing bird poems to catch a lover. When Don Alejandro buys a book on ornithology so that he can learn how to better distinguish the various species, Goyita is annoyed, for she fears this will lessen her power over him. She clearly has a superior knowledge of nature (also demonstrated in a classroom scene where she lectures on plants) but has to rely on the Don to teach her table manners.

This special knowledge of birds undoubtedly led her to select Don Alejandro as her game. She tells him she knew his wife for many years, accusing her of being snobbish and of stealing her nests. Goyita harshly condemns Isabel’s practice of putting nests behind glass: “Nests out of trees are horrible!” Like the teacher, Isabel obviously has been both a model and an object of intense rivalry—another surrogate mother, an association which strengthens Goyita’s Oedipal attraction to Alejandro.

Don Alejandro and the Sergeant, the two men who function as father surrogates for Goyita, are first brought together in a shop full of caged birds; both men perceive her strength (one with love, the other with fear) and both are ensnared in her tragic Oedipal game. Like her pet eagle, the Don becomes the object of her romantic attentions: both are captured and trained, and their natural superiority enhances her power as their Mistress. After a bitter family quarrel in which her mother punishes her while her father remains silent, Goyita turns for affection to her eagle, kissing it and speaking tenderly: “Are you hungry? Don’t worry, I’ll take care of you. I’ll teach you how to fly.” These loving words
would apply equally well to Alejandro, whom she teaches how to love. Yet she dominates him the way her mother henpecks her father, only in a more loving manner that is compatible with the tradition of chivalric romance.

The sergeant is associated with ominous birds of prey—the raven and the hawk. The intensity of hatred between Goïta and her enemy probably masks a sexual attraction. Like her mother, she realizes that he exerts the power and authority her weak father lacks; yet instead of respecting and courting him like her mother, she rebels. As the civil officer of the city and as the tyrannical boss who repeatedly humiliates her father, the sergeant quite literally represents the highest patriarchal authority over Goïta. In her battle against him, she enlists as allies the imperial eagle, the natural lord among birds, and Don Alejandro, an eccentric aristocrat, but both become pawns in the game. The sergeant presents her keeping a caged bird of such power, as if it somehow lessens his own authority; eventually he takes the eagle and lets it go. Similarly, he complains to her father that Goïta’s romance with Don Alejandro is “making us look absurd.” He confiscates the love token that the Don had given her—a medal from a French concentration camp, also associated with entrapment. Finally, with Goïta’s father by his side, the sergeant responds to Don Alejandro’s challenge by gunning him down; it is the father who discovers that the Don’s rifle contained nothing but blanks. He immediately understands the Don’s noble gesture because he himself had earlier faked a beating of Goïta in order to please his demanding wife.

The film ends with two sequences that pay homage to the Don in contrasting tones. A funeral procession provides the tragic perspective. Don Alejandro’s corpse is carried through town by a wagon led by the priest and the two policemen, with the white horse tethered behind. As the wagon passes by, people take off their hats in respect; the teacher looks on in wise sadness, seeing that her prediction has come true, and the mistress from Salamanca sits in her car weeping. The scene fades to black.

The final sequence lyrically affirms Don Alejandro’s transcendence, implying a comic acceptance of death as part of the natural cycle. The first shot repeats the aerial view from the opening sequence; we see the white horse, Alejandro’s spirit of chivalry, running freely across the landscape. Then the film cuts to Goïta approaching the place on the hill where Don Alejandro first taught her how to conduct. She is wearing a white translucent sweater that reveals her lithe body has matured. At first we hear only the wind, but then Goïta speaks softly to the stone monument, as she earlier spoke to her eagle: “Hi, Alejandro. Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me. I haven’t met anyone in all this time and never will, never. Eccentric, you’re an eccentric. You’ve taught me another new word. It also starts with ‘A.’ I’m allowed to say it—Amor.”

Deepening the “A” cut into her palm, she places her hand on the stone and reaffirms their secret pact, but the final confirmation is musical. As she stands on the stone and begins to conduct, Haydn’s “Creation” takes over the sound track, and the camera makes a series of lyrical sweeps before pulling away in an extreme long shot, then rhythmically intercuts between the white horse running in a circle, Goïta conducting, and finally the horse running freely beneath the clouds and along the symmetrical line of trees. This peaceful union of art and nature closes the circle of the narrative structure with joyful harmony.

*El Nido* is a marvellously intelligent film that avoids all clichés and delights both with its sophisticated artistry and its primordial childish fantasies of unlimited power and eternal love.

—MARSHA KINDER

NOTES


2. I have seen Héctor Alterio in only one other film—Jaime Chavarri’s *A Un Dios Desconocido (To an Unknown God)*, 1977, but will never forget his performance, which won the “Best Actor Award” at the San Sebastian Film Festival that year. There he played a middle-aged homosexual magician haunted by a childhood love for another boy, which was mysteriously linked to the murder of Federico García Lorca. Both in that film and in *El Nido*, he displays an incredible range of expressiveness in his face, body and voice that is capable of moving from the deepest melancholy to the most ecstatic joy.

DRESSED TO KILL


Just as Hitchcock’s reputation was established, or at least greatly enhanced, by the claim of such auteurist critics as Truffaut, Chabrol and Robin Wood that the director repeatedly transcended the genre in which he was operating,