

REVIEWS

"A Nightmarish Masterpiece!" -Elliot Stein, *Village Voice*

Described by filmmaker John Waters as: *More intense than Pier Paolo Pasolini's SALO.*

TURNER CLASSIC MOVIES REVIEW

In a Glass Cage

There was a fun book published in 1992 called *Cut! Horror Writers on Horror Film* where each chapter addressed thoughts on the horror genre by such illustrious names as Anne Rice, Cliver Barker, and many others. One chapter, written by Stanley Wiater, was boldly titled "Disturbo 13: The Most Disturbing Horror Films Ever Made." Not surprisingly, over a third of his selection had ties to the atrocities of war, such as *Salo, the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975), *Man Behind the Sun* (1988), *Combat Shock* (1986), *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS* (1974), and **In a Glass Cage** (1986). This last title was previously only available as either a worn Cinevista tape or a bad dub, but it has now recently been released on dvd by Cult Epics in its original 1.85:1 aspect ratio. Caution hardly needs to be dispersed to anybody with a casual knowledge of any of the aforementioned titles, but all other readers should take note that the placement of **In a Glass Cage** on the "Disturbo 13" list is well deserved.

The story begins with a scene of fetishistic torture in a crumbling chamber. The victim is a naked young boy who is suspended from a ceiling rafter. The predator is

an older man who hovers over his prey with a camera, caresses the body, and then picks up a wood post and brings it down on the back of the young boys head. The gruesome deed done (and witnessed by an unseen third party), the man then runs up the stairs to the rooftop, and teeters on the edge for only a moment before plummeting to - not his end, but the beginning of a new life paralyzed from the neck down; a prisoner within an iron lung. The man is Klaus (Gunter Meisner), a former Nazi doctor who is living in exile in an isolated Spanish villa along with his wife Griselda (Marisa Paredes) and daughter Rena (Gisela Echevarria). This unusual family soon finds itself beset by a young applicant, Angelo (David Sust), whose overzealous aims at being Klaus's attendant echo the mentor/student horror found in Stephen King's novella of *Apt Pupil* (1981).

Both Meisner and Paredes are seasoned professionals who bring expected intensity to their roles, but the child actors illicit chills as well. Given the disturbing sadomasochistic elements that touch on pedophilia and child abuse there is some comfort to be had from the end credits that assure nervous viewers that all the scenes with under-age actors, despite their realism, were filmed with scrupulous attention to normal ethics (of course, there is no definition for "normal" here). Spanish writer/director Agustin Villaronga delivers a film that is beautifully crafted and both praised and condemned for making curious bedmates of artful cinema and depraved atrocities. The dvd also includes brief interview excerpts with Villaronga (oddly unbalanced with the director filmed to the extreme left of the frame) wherein he mentions that one of his inspirations was the 15th century French soldier and sadist Gilles De Rais, who is listed in Stephen Thrower's dvd liner notes as "a lieutenant to Joan of Arc notorious for practicing alchemy, black magic, and the systematic rape and murder of some 400 boys and girls." Villaronga added the Nazi element to give the subject more contemporary currency. Anybody looking for another horror film with interesting parallels to **In a Glass Cage** but with less transgressive behavior should consider *The Devil's Backbone* (2001) - another Spanish film about the negative effect of war on children that happens to star

Marisa Paredes with a score by Javier Navarrete (who also scored **In a Glass Cage**).

By: Pablo Kjolseth

In A Glass Cage (1986)

Reviewed by Lawrence P. Raffel (**MONSTERSATPLAY.COM**)

Whether or not the announcement of a DVD release for In A Glass Cage (Tras el Cristal) should have evoked excitement around here is a debatable topic. A very difficult film to classify and an even more difficult film to digest, In A Glass Cage has been treasured by cult and horror fans over the years as one of cinema's most beautifully realized atrocities set to film. Truly a film for only the most adventurous moviegoer, even after acceptance you'll most likely want to view this one alone, in the privacy of your own home, away from any judging eyes. This DVD release of In A Glass Cage is accepted with open arms, and while it may not exemplify what one would want to consider to be the films *definitive* DVD release, it is the best available option to date, easily viewed as a fine addition to any questionable, eclectic DVD collection.

One's general reaction to the opening moments of this film would surely dictate his/her ability to stick around to the bitter end. That being said the film opens as a young boy, nude and beaten is strapped up by his arms, hanging in a warehouse. His attacker is Klaus (Günter Meisner), a former Nazi officer and a mostly confused individual. The boy's life is put to an end with a swift wallop to the head by a board. Klaus then proceeds an attempt on his own life as he jumps to the ground below. Month's later and Klaus is confined to an iron lung, looked after by his wife Griselda (Marisa Paredes), and daughter Rena (Gisela Echevarria). A mysterious young man

named Angelo enters the room that Klaus is kept in, convincing the old man to accept him has his new nurse (despite the fact the he obviously doesn't have any nursing skills) much to the chagrin of his wife who's about to throw in the towel herself. This is where the story begins to take an even more disturbing turn, if that's even possible.

Angelo and Klaus form an exceptionally disturbing bond playing bizarre mind games consisting mostly of violent and sexual undertones. Angelo spends some of his time reading from Klaus' journals, while other times he messes around with the oxygen levels of the tank as he humps Klaus or masturbates on his face. Angelo essentially describes to Klaus how he wants to be just like him, picking up exactly where he left off. Yikes, that's just what we need! Pretty soon Angelo's true colors come shining through, and you know what folks? It ain't gonna be anywhere remotely near to being pretty or politically correct, that's fer dang sher.

I'm certainly not going to lie to you here, In A Glass Cage is a very difficult film to watch. The kind of emotions or feelings that surge through the viewer while watching this film will be solely dependent on the type of person that you are, but one thing's for sure. You will walk away from this film affected, there's no doubt about that. Affected because In A Glass Cage never comes across as exploitation for exploitation's sake. This is a film that will entertain, disgust, insult and enrage the viewer. However, the undeniable fact that you'll also walk away mesmerized by the disgusting beauty of this film itself, is part of its undeniable charm and appeal.

Performances are so frighteningly harrowing, it's fucking scary. If it weren't for a disclaimer about the youngin's in this film during a fairly candid interview with director Agust'n Villaronga (we caught his latest film [Aro Tolbukin](#) at the Philly Film Fest this year and loved it), I'd have to question the actual level of their willing participation. The demoralization of children in films is quite often a sore spot with a lot of people, as well it should be. Please be aware that this is a huge part of In A Glass Cage and its progression. Actual onscreen violence levels are quite low, but

that doesn't make the film itself any less of a freak show. This is heavy duty stuff here, just so you've been warned.

Somewhere between horror and utterly bizarre erotic mayhem, *In A Glass Cage* attempts to find its place in the film world. Director Villaronga is a true talent dealing with the questionable subject matter in an oddly acceptable way. There are scenes in this film that are so beautifully realized, they could even give some of the greatest gialli a run for their money - and that is not an exaggeration. The influence of this film is far reaching, genre fans experiencing this film for the first time will no doubt notice the effect this film has had on many to follow.

Cult Epic's non-anamorphic transfer here is acceptable, but not nearly as outstanding as one would have hoped. Colors are fairly sharp and accurate (this fact will vary in specific scenes) while black levels are slightly off. Overall, this transfer is quite pleasing and light-years beyond those fuzzy bootlegs we've had to deal with over the years. Still, a nice anamorphic transfer would have been swell, such is life. Audio is presented in Spanish mono with optional English subs. The subs are nice and readable and appear accurate.

Extras include an interesting interview with Villaronga that runs just under 10-minutes and a few pages of liner notes. For the adventurous moviegoer, *In A Glass Cage* comes highly recommended. The film itself is a perfect blend and a shining example of the beautiful side that ugliness can take on. Take it in, and love it or hate it, this film will have you talking for the rest of your life. That's got to account for something, doesn't it? If you're feelin' brave enough, *In A Glass Cage* comes highly recommended.



In a Glass Cage

Overall rating: ★★★★★

Reviewed by 1 Epinions user -

Agustin Villaronga's TRAS EL CRISTAL is sickening, yet fascinating '03

Author's Product Rating

★★★★★

Pros

A unique and distressing look into the realm of human madness

Cons

Probably one of the most disturbing films you'll ever see

The Bottom Line

Definitely not for sensitive viewers, TRAS EL CRISTAL is a film that will provide much thought for the intellectual viewer. My highest recommendation for this one.

Full Review

Plot Details: This opinion reveals major details about the movie's plot.

First off, before I set into the review for this long forgotten film, I should warn anyone at all interested in the film that at the end, there is a disclaimer that states that no children were harmed during filming. Knowing that, you should have some

vague idea of what to expect during the film, and even so, you'll probably be downright disgusted (and rightly so) by the content of the Spanish film IN A GLASS CAGE, a.k.a. TRAS EL CRISTAL.

Agustin Villaronga's debut film is truly one of the handful of films out there that simply defies the standards of good taste, and yet remains a fascinating look at some of the more demented aspects of the human psyche. TRAS EL CRISTAL is well made, but contains content the likes of which are nearly unheard of anymore, especially in the whitewashed world of American studio films. In the end, I think films like this are what society needs more of to show just how awful humans can be to one another and, by detailing these atrocities, hopefully can deter individuals from imitating them. Despite the heinous content, after viewing this film, one would earn a greater appreciation of human life and mortality.

TRAS EL CRISTAL begins with a scene of a middle aged man in a room. We are shown a naked young boy strung up with ropes from the ceiling across the room, being photographed by the older man. After a round of photos, the man picks up a board and viciously, but implicitly, strikes the boy across the back with it. The man, now appearing to come to terms with what he has done, climbs a staircase to the top of the building and prepares to throw himself off the ledge. This whole time, we watch the scene from the perspective of an unseen third party, who finally picks up the man's sketch book, presumably filled with stories of his torturous escapades.

Jump ahead to a future date. The man, after falling from the tower, has been paralyzed and is confined to a huge iron lung to keep him alive. We learn that this man was a Nazi during WWII who was responsible for torturing and molesting scores of young boys during his tenure in the German regime. Now confined to this "glass cage," the man, Klaus, is at the mercy of those around him to keep him alive. His wife, fed up with the daily toils of making sure the iron lung is operating properly, is trying to find someone capable of caring for her husband so she and her young

daughter can carry on with their lives.

A mysterious young man appears on the scene, telling the wife that he is prepared to care for her husband. The wife doesn't trust the young man, Angelo, but her paralyzed husband insists that he stays, setting up the basis for the twisted story of *TRAS EL CRISTAL*.

To put it simply, *TRAS EL CRISTAL* belongs in the same league as Pier Paolo Pasolini's *SALO, OR THE 120 DAYS OF SODOM* in that most critics would instantly dismiss the film as sensational garbage without fully grasping what is actually being implied and suggested by the film. There's no way that writer/director Agustin Villaronga is advocating this kind of behavior or, God forbid, using the offensive material in this film simply to sell tickets on the basis of sensationalism. To anyone actually using their brain, the material is obviously an indictment of the horrors propagated by human beings against their own kind. *CRISTAL* deals with elements of child molestation and torture, presented in graphic detail, and often using young children in the film, who obviously were subjected to some type of physical or psychological abuse during the making of the film. There simply is no way that this abuse could not have happened, especially when we see a couple of young boys stripped down and forced to engage in sex acts with the former Nazi or his newly acquired caregiver. Although none of these acts are shown graphically, to the films credit, the implications that are given are just plain horrendous; a flashback shows Klaus offering a young boy money and then forcing the youth to fellate him; another instance shows a young boy having gasoline injected into his heart to gradually end his life. Obviously, this film goes WAY above what you'd see in your average film, but in doing so, shows just how cruel and barbaric humans can be, and how far they will go to satisfy their twisted sexual desires.

In the story, Angelo, who was one of the youths Klaus molested during the war, goes completely insane, taking over all operations in the house and eventually

continuing in Klaus's hideous obsessions. Klaus at this point is completely against continuing these fantasies, and to his credit, appears to have realized the horror of what he once did. Due to his condition, however, Klaus is forced to suffer through Angelo's sadistic excesses without any way to stop him.

It's a shame that most audiences would instantly dismiss this film as exploitative garbage, or simply stop viewing it, after they begin to understand the dynamics of the storyline. If given the chance, TRAS EL CRISTAL becomes one of the only true horror films ever, not in the sense that there is a faceless killer slaughtering teens, or a hideous monster on the loose; in the case of this film, the monster is an otherwise normal human being who commits such indescribable crimes against humanity that the end result is one of the most horrific stories ever committed to film, and one of the only times a viewer would get the opportunity to see such a thoroughly disgusting and repulsive story.

I really can't begin to express my disappointment in the failure of the majority of audiences to stomach this film. A film like this deserves to be seen no matter what the viewer's moral boundaries are: in viewing a film such as TRAS EL CRISTAL one would come to realize just how horrendous the ability of the human to commit such acts really is. There is really nothing that is past the capability of some individuals, and by viewing the worst that the human could accomplish, a viewer hopefully would come to realize his or her responsibility to fight against such atrocities. Say whatever you want about such films as SCHINDLER'S LIST; in my opinion, TRAS EL CRISTAL is the most powerful film about the horrors of the Nazi regime ever, illustrating just how savage and completely inhuman war can be.

The film itself is filmed in a way that makes all this hit home even more. First, none of the more graphic sexual acts in the film are ever shown graphically. We are instead left to imagine the worst in our own minds, making CRISTAL all the more disturbing. Second, the film itself has a grainy consistency that makes it look more

authentic than your average big budget Hollywood blockbuster. Again, this works to CRISTAL's advantage. The acting in this film is simply incredible. None of the actors in this film were incredibly well known, and all give very moving and true-to-life performances that make the story here work. Especially impressive are Gunter Meisner ("Slugworth" from WILLY WONKA AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY) as Klaus and unknown actor David Sust (in his acting debut no less) as Angelo. Finally, a haunting music score by Javier Navarrete complements the action perfectly.

This whole film is very poignant in an all -encompassing manner.



In a Glass Cage - Special Edition

Cult Epics through CAV Distributing// Unrated // \$29.95 // September 2, 2003

Review by Randy Miller III| posted September 30, 2003



MOVIE	★	★	★	★	★
VIDEO	★	★	★	★	★
AUDIO	★	★	★	★	★
EXTRAS	★	★	★	★	★
REPLAY	★	★	★	★	★

ADVICE: Recommended

The Movie

In A Glass Cage (Tras el Cristal) is a movie not many have seen since its original release in 1986. It's sort of toiled in relative obscurity, never really garnering tons of attention. Now over 15 years later, it gets another shot at reaching a larger audience through the growing phenomenon of DVD, specifically a new 'Special Edition' from CAV. Why this movie hasn't been more widely seen is both obvious and puzzling at the same time. At the heart of the matter is the gruesome subject matter portrayed in the film, which undoubtedly turned many people away. Most audiences prefer to see more sanitized acts of violence and cruelty, and *In A Glass Cage* is anything but sanitized. Make no mistake about it, this is a hard movie to watch, and will most likely make your stomach turn on more than one occasion. This is not because of extreme gore (although it is quite violent), but more from the subject matter shown and implied. The film is also entirely in Spanish, and many audiences just aren't willing to accept subtitles. For these reasons, it's easy to see why John Q. Public hasn't heard of this one.

On the other hand, he darn well *should* have. *In A Glass Cage* deals with its extreme subject matter admirably. Regardless of what a film may be about, what always separates the good from the bad is the way in which this information is presented. Beautifully filmed, acted, and directed, this film is a work of art and makes you think hard about what's in front of you, instead of going for empty shock value. There's a big difference, and this film should be praised for it. Still, the first-time viewer must be warned that this movie is not for the sensitive and should not be taken lightly.

Of course, you'll want the details:

(CAUTION: mild spoiler alert)

The main subject of the film, Klaus, is a WWII Nazi torturer. Just for his own pleasure, he abuses and murders young boys, even after the war is over...plain and simple, that should tell you if you're emotionally ready to see this film. Eventually, his conscience gets to him, and he unsuccessfully attempts suicide. Essentially now on life support, his emotions take over and he's living his own personal nightmare, haunted by the scars he's inflicted upon both himself and others. Unfortunately for Klaus, a new face appears in his life, and he realizes his real nightmares are just beginning. Wow, do I sound like the back of the box or what?

(end spoilers)

The point, again, is not if you *should* see this film. It's really if you're *ready* to see this film. It questions not only morality, but privacy, revenge, and other hot buttons. This new Special Edition serves no other basic purpose than to preserve the film itself. In other words, it's really thin on the extras, but let's see what else it has to offer:

The DVD

Video:

It really surprises me that studios are still producing non-anamorphic discs. While I don't currently own a widescreen television, it's nice to know that when I do, I'll be able to enjoy most of my current DVD collection to the fullest. Sadly, this release does not take advantage of anamorphic widescreen, but it still looks pretty good. Presented in its original 1.85:1 aspect ratio, *In A Glass Cage* looks as beautiful (and

sometimes hideous) as it was meant to be seen. Colors are deliberately on the muted side (except for most instances of red) and appear to be fairly clean. The overall image is fine, but not without the occasional spot of dirt or grain. Still, this is the best presentation of the movie you're likely to find.

Audio:

Purists will be happy to know that the original sound is preserved in 2-channel Spanish mono, so the only activity present is in the front speakers. While it's great that the true feeling of the original presentation was respected, I can't help but think how a 5.1 mix (or Dolby Surround) may have only added to the creep-out factor here. However, what we do get is sufficient, as the dialogue and music come through fine.

Extras:

The extras are extremely thin for a 'Special Edition'...only a 10-minute interview with director Agustin Villaronga is present, but it's pretty interesting. He sheds some light on the look of the film, and the very sensitive subject matter with which he's dealing. I don't have the packaging here to review, but I hear there's also a nice insert containing an essay on the film as well. Sadly though, that's it.

Menu design and presentation:

The menus are nicely done, with animation and music from the film. They do their job just fine, with simple navigation, and help convey the unsettling nature of *In A Glass Cage*.

Should anything else have been included?

For a movie as controversial and disturbing as this one, it's always nice to see the cast and crew on board to back up the movie...too bad it didn't happen here. Much more could have been done to support *In A Glass Cage*, particularly in the eye of the public. A full commentary from the director would have been great to hear. Still, it could be argued that this release is meant to let the film speak for itself, but the words "Special Edition" can't really apply to this DVD. Even a trailer or some promotional materials would have been nice to see, or a photo gallery.

Final Thoughts

This movie was stunning on several levels. For one, it was extremely well conceived, acted, photographed, and directed. On another level, it stunned me to see such disturbing detail conveyed on film. I've always been interested in controversial topics---good or bad, they get people *thinking* about things---and I'm happy to say that *In A Glass Cage* did not disappoint as a film. While I expected more from the DVD itself, we at least get a decent version of the movie and a nice interview with the director. If you've got the stomach for it, this one is definitely **Recommended**. While not exactly family movie night material, this deserves to be represented in your collection.

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In A Glass Cage

****1/2** (Audio: C, Video: B-, Features: C-)

Starring Gunter Meisner, David Sust and Marisa Paredes. Directed and written by Agustin Villaronga. Produced by Teresa Enrich. Released by Cult Epics. 1986. 108 minutes. Unrated.

Non-anamorphic widescreen, Mono audio, Interview with director Agustin Villaronga, 2-page liner notes.

If Dario Argento directed *Apt Pupil*, you'd get *In a Glass Cage*, Agustin Villaronga's notorious 1986 horror film that's too thought-provoking to dismiss as exploitative, but too exploitative to praise as thought-provoking.

The film is an unpleasant experience, but one that constantly thwarts your best attempts to dismiss it as garbage. *In a Glass Cage* concerns itself with not one, but two disturbing subjects: Nazi war crimes and pedophilia. It takes a director of uncommon skill and intelligence to avoid having the film come off as reprehensible. Agustin Villaronga is not that director. However, he clearly thinks he is, so the viewer sticks around hoping his point is so trenchant that it's worth sitting through some truly gut-wrenching scenes.

Klaus (Meisner) is a doctor whose wartime responsibilities in a concentration camp enabled him to commit heinous sex crimes against young boys. After the war, escalating feelings of guilt drive him to attempt suicide. Unsuccessful, he is confined to a dramatically convenient iron lung, while his caretaker wife, Griselda (Paredes) dreams of a better life for her and their young daughter (Gisela Echevarria).

Griselda tries to hire a nurse to care for Klaus, which leads to the arrival of the lanky, creepy Angelo (Sust). Although Angelo has scant experience caring for the sick, Klaus insists he be hired. As it turns out, Angelo has first hand knowledge of Klaus' past and the two begin a bizarre relationship that includes reading from Klaus' Nazi diary and, ultimately, tormenting a new generation of young, local boys.

Despite its subject matter, the film never comes off as completely irresponsible, which is praise of a sort. However, if Villaronga insists on using Nazism and pedophilia as his jumping off point, his conclusion should be more interesting than it is. Thankfully, the vast majority of the violence is off-screen. Whether that was a moral or budget consideration is up for debate.

Like the similarly disturbing *Faces of Death*, *In a Glass Cage* has an underground fan base that enjoys the film on grainy, fifth generation VHS dubs. Now, thanks to distributor Cult Epics, one can experience the joys of pedophilia in all its digital glory. The results are good, but should have been better. The film, which is fairly well directed with some creepy lighting and set design, could have benefited from the unearthing of a new print or cleaning up of the old print. However, the film is purposely drab to begin with and the non-anamorphic letterbox transfer has issues with shadow detail and print flaws. Also, many scenes feature distracting edge enhancements. Audio is a mono affair that reproduces the Spanish language dialogue just fine. English subtitles are included.

The only extra is a recent, poorly-edited, ten-minute interview with Villaronga, where he attempts to over-intellectualize his motivation for doing the film. He even admits making the main character a Nazi only because WWII was more contemporary than the Hundred Years War, which provided Villaronga with his original inspiration.

In a Glass Cage has its defenders, people who hopefully will stay at least 500 yards away from my house. The fact that, according to Rotten Tomatoes, the majority of positives reviews come from websites like Shock Cinema and Monsters at Play should tell you something. -Mark Keizer