

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **THE MADWOMAN OF THE HOUSE- RESIDENT LUNATIC**

/ *La Loca De La Casa* (1950)

Juan Bustillo Oro

**Contents** (Overview – Synopsis -Story – Themes – Characters)

### OVERVIEW

In *La Loca de la Casa* (1950), Juan Bustillo Oro explores women's agency and power within a patriarchal culture that lionizes the crude, generative energy of machismo along with generational patrilineal control of social position. Bustillo Oro blends melodrama and farce to juxtapose two opposite yet ultimately complementary personae: the dynamic yet crude self-made man and the repository of virtue and vision, the novice nun. The movie, based on an 1892 play by the Spanish author, Benito Pérez Galdós, explores the tension between the now-effete Spanish aristocracy and entrepreneurial zeal of an ambitious arreviste. In Bustillo Oro's adaptation, the film embraces Mexican culture and identity, and celebrates the often comical energy of the "no-filter" protagonist, José María Cruz, and the steel backbone of the slender, soft-voiced novitiate nun-turned "novia," Victoria Moncada.

In *La Loca de la Casa*, Bustillo Oro blends Mexican Expressionism with realism / naturalism. The high-contrast cinematographic techniques of chiaroscuro remind the viewer of his use of light in scenes shot in the monastery in *Dos Monjes*. Naturalism, particularly in the depiction of relationships between people, is reflected in his fluid use of close-ups and two-shots. This film represents a transition for Bustillo Oro to ultra-realism or naturalism, which he often imbues with a sense of the sacred, particularly as it relates to the transformation of something that starts out as earthy, raw and unformed, and ends up as an entity with a divine purpose. The scrappy, self-made industrialist, José María Cruz, connects with pure light of a determined young woman from a fading elite family, and together they complement each other in a way that echoes Mexican identity with its brash ranches, mines, and industry and the Virgin of Guadalupe.

### SYNOPSIS

The once-wealth Moncada family is on the verge of bankruptcy, thanks to disastrous business decisions and poor operations of their factory. The one person who can save the business by investing in it is an up-and-coming business magnate, Jose Maria Cruz, who, ironically, grew up as a son of a worker on the Moncada estate. As a condition of investment, he wants to marry one of the Moncada daughters. Don Juan and his wife Dona Eulalia, cannot say "no," and begrudgingly introduce their daughter, Gabriela, to him. When Jose Maria arrives for dinner, Gabriela finds him brash, boorish, and a braggart. He boasts of having "killed two tigers with his bare hands" and his own qualities that make him successful. After refusing to marry, the other daughter, Victoria, who is at a convent training to be a nun, agrees to give up her vows and sacrifice herself to marry the brute for the good of the family. Jose Maria finds her to have the qualities he is looking for in a wife, and he marries her in a ceremony in the factory. The family looks on as though they were watching human sacrifice. After the wedding, Victoria starts to work with Jose Maria in the administrative part of the business, and she is quite good at it. They are happy in their spartan life carved out of a part of the factory until one of Victoria's former would-be suitors, Daniel, starts lurking about. Jealous, Jose Maria accuses Victoria of infidelity. Outraged, Victoria returns home. Daniel challenges him to a duel. However, in the meantime, Jose Maria learns that Victoria has spurned Daniel at every point. He refuses to participate in violence. He returns to beg Victoria's forgiveness. She does so, but this time, with terms and conditions that

will allow her to do the charity work she has wanted to do. He agrees, happy to have her back, and overjoyed to learn he will be a father.

## STORY

*Victoria in the Convent:* The film opens in a convent where five novice nuns dressed in white habits are speaking to each other about one of their sister nuns, Victoria. In the meantime, Novice Victoria is speaking to the Mother Superior about becoming a nun. Victoria is expressing how much she loves being in the convent and studying to become a nun. Mother Superior, who is very kind, expresses her satisfaction with Victoria's progress. "If everything goes well, you'll take your orders the next December 8," she says to Victoria. Victoria drops to her knees: "Thank you, Mother, thank you." They then discuss Victoria's upcoming trip to visit her family. "They will be so surprised to see me – they called me "our resident madwoman," exclaims Victoria.



*Financial disaster* Her father, Don Juan de Moncada, is in his office with his business partner and they are discussing how grim the future looks. They owe a great deal of money to a very successful businessman who, coincidentally, grew up in the Moncada household. His father and mother were workers. Don Juan does not know how they will possibly come up with the money. Don Juan takes the letter without reading it and excuses himself, saying he must attend to business. He expresses concern about the huge debt to José María Cruz. They will lose everything unless they explore the idea that Gabriela marry José María Cruz as proposed by José María. He agrees to invite José María to dinner.

*José María proposes marriage* José María arrives for dinner and proceeds to loudly proclaim that he wants to fulfill a childhood dream and to someday own the Moncada house and to blend his bloodlines with theirs, and to have many children. This conversation does not go over well. When asked how he achieved his success, José María begins to describe his exploits. They are quite impressive – even bone-chilling. He describes how he had to kill a man in self-defense and then two tigers with his bare hands – even gouging out the eyes of one. Still at the dinner table, José María eats his chicken with his fingers and slurps with obvious abandon. “I’m a brute, but I’m powerful and successful!” he proclaims. “I want to marry your daughter.” He explains that in doing so, all the financial problems will go away.

*Gabriela refuses the marriage proposal* The time comes for Gabriela’s response to the marriage proposal. The response is not long in coming: “I would not marry you if you were last person on earth!” This response is not taken well. “I will ruin you!” shouts José María. Victoria listens to her sister, Gabriela, express horror at the prospect of having to accept the hand of José María Cruz in marriage. Their father, Don Juan Moncada, looks down with concern and shame.



*Victoria arrives home* Victoria arrives for her visit with the family at the height of the crisis. “I can’t marry that brute!” asserts Gabriela. Further complicating the situation is the fact that Gabriela is in love with someone else. Victoria listens to the situation with concern, and she realizes that the failure to marry will mean disaster for her father and the entire family.

*Victoria’s proposal* Victoria brings food to her father, and encourages him to eat. He is very worried – he’s made the last payment he can, and everything will be lost. Victoria proposes to marry José María Cruz if it will save her father and the family. José María protests – “Marriage is not like that – you can’t just switch one daughter for another.” She smiles and looks absolutely radiant. “God is telling me to do this,” she said. Don Juan demurs and says he doesn’t like it. Victoria smiles – I’m the Resident Lunatic, remember?”

*Victoria’s proposal to José María Cruz* Victoria, accompanied by the Mother Superior, visits José María Cruz in his office. She introduces herself as Gabriela’s sister, and then they begin to share recollections of their childhood. “You were a brute,” exclaims Victoria. “I still am,” responds José María. Victoria explains that to save her father’s assets, it seems it is necessary to sell a daughter into marriage. Sr. Cruz explains that is not the case. Instead, he looks at it as a very practical. “In marriage, you don’t start out being in love. That comes later,” he explains. Later, José María visits the Moncada household. Victoria lays out the terms of the marriage to José María and explains it is a great sacrifice for Señorita Moncada. He agrees to all the conditions. Then, at the end, Victoria informs him that he will be in fact marrying her. “What! Is this a joke??” He is offended at first, but then, excited about achieving his goals. He assures her (after first becoming indignant, thinking that she was mocking him because she’s still a nun), that she will never regret her decision.



*Wedding, Honeymoon, and Home in the Factory:* It is a brief courtship, and they have their wedding reception in the factory. During the reception, Victoria's father looks horrified, as though he is witnessing human sacrifice. Victoria herself looks quite ill. José María offers a toast and then explains that they will be living in an apartment in the factory. They will be working together. Victoria displays a profound lack of enthusiasm at her wedding dinner. Victoria's family look on upon the wedding reception. Gabriela weeps.



*My Wife, My Worker:* Time goes by and Victoria learns how to use the different machines in the office and she also becomes an astute businesswoman and negotiator. Things are going well, and the married couple seems to be developing true mutual regard. Victoria has become a very diligent and responsible administrative assistant. José María looks on, and in this case, wishes to speak to her, but she is closely examining her figures. Don Juan visits Victoria and expresses his horror that she is working so much. Why did you marry a rich man just to be working like this? Victoria explains that she doesn't mind it and that she's even gotten a raise. Gabriela expresses dismay that Victoria is working so hard in the factory. Victoria explains that she actually likes the work and that she does not mind.



*Daniel Lurks, José María jumps to conclusions:* Not all is rosy, however. Daniel is obsessed with Victoria. There are some financial issues. Victoria offers to help Daniel and his mother by sending a check. When José María finds out, he is filled with rage and jealousy. Victoria explains that she only wanted to help and that she has been absolutely faithful. It does not work. He keeps accusing her to the point that Victoria says she will leave.

*Daniel Challenge José María to a Duel:* Daniel goes to visit José María with the intent of challenging him to a duel. However, José María refuses to do so, particularly after he learns that Daniel was rejected by Victoria. He turns to Daniel and says, "No need to try to kill me. Instead, let me be your friend. I can give you good advice. Go to America, make a lot of money, and then come back." Daniel is rather shocked, but goes away quietly. After nearly falling to blows in their previous encounter, Daniel visits José María, who suddenly realizes that Victoria has never liked Daniel and that she has spurned all his advances. José María offers to give Daniel brotherly advice. "I'll be your friend. Got to the U.S. and work hard, come back wealthy, Daniel!"



*Victoria is at her family house* Victoria goes home to her father's house, where she talks to him about what happened. Don Juan recommends divorce. Victoria explains that it will be difficult given that she is pregnant.

*Jose Maria follows her* José María races to the Moncada home to pay a visit to Victoria and to beg her to come back. He is greeted by Don Juan, who explains that Victoria is praying in the family sanctuary and that he should not interrupt her. Plus, there is divorce to think about, and now, with what will be happening in a few months, it will be complicated. To that, José María lets out a "grito" (a Mexican whoop) and shouts, "So it's true! I will be a father!"

*Praying in the Family Sanctuary:* María is kneeling at the altar, deep in prayer. When José María interrupts her, her first expression is of joy. She quickly becomes stern and chides him for interrupting her prayers. He pulls a Prie-Dieu (prayer kneeler) toward her so that they can pray next to each other. He prays, and then leaves the sanctuary, to wait outside anxiously. José María pulls a kneeling station (Prie Dieu) to place it next to Victoria so he can speak to her, and then pray alongside her.





*Victoria's bargain* After Victoria leaves the sanctuary and speaks with José María, neither sees that Don Juan is in the shadows, listening in on their conversation. What he hears is Victoria driving a hard bargain about their life together in the future. In addition to their life together, Victoria wants to make sure her father receives the percentage of the company that he lost in all the renegotiations. She also wants to fund a charity for the good of the community with some of the revenue of the company's operations. José María capitulates; Victoria knows he'll do anything in the service of his dream of joined blood, a large family, and a legacy for future generations. Victoria, 5 months pregnant, drives a hard bargain, as José María looks forward to reuniting and having a child. She leverages the baby to restore her father's interest in the company he founded, and to set up an ongoing charity for the good of the community. Reunited, José María and Victoria envision themselves as always being together.



## THEMES

**Women's Agency in a Patriarchal World:** The original play was published in Spain in 1892, and it was not too surprising to see that women's power emanated from their marital status and above all, their ability to become mothers. Nevertheless, there is "virtue power" in the sense that a virtuous woman, particularly a nun, is seen as a socialization vector, which is to say that in their roles as teachers and expositors of values, they wield a very potent normative force. In the complex world of mid 20<sup>th</sup>-century Mexico, with the vestiges of colonial elite's lineages and the powerful energy of the newly empowered people who were granted land through the "reforma" and the "ejido" system, a virtuous woman would be, above all, a stabilizing presence eliciting absolute trust. So, when Victoria appears in her white habit showing she is a novice, and she wishes to restore her father's interest in the company he founded, she has credibility and agency. The real source of self-determination and agency come with her ability to bear children, however.

**New Money vs. Old Money:** In many works of literature and art, the "nouveau" or "arriviste" are considered crass and are mocked. In mid-twentieth-century Mexico, however, the Revolution resulted in reforms that distributed land to the people. In this context, the "new" was considered to be a positive outgrowth of personal enterprise, hard work, and an entrepreneurial spirit, and "old money" would be considered to be part of the ancien regime, the snobbish and ultimately incompetent elite. José María Cruz is crude and blurts out his impressions without filtering them at all. Nevertheless, he is a sympathetic character because he is honest. His ruthlessness needs to be mediated by the softening presence of someone who represents a connection to the eternal verities, a conduit of virtue and kindness.

**Self-Sacrifice:** The theme of self-sacrifice appears many times in the film. It first appears when Gabriela considers sacrificing herself to marry José María Cruz. Later, the sacrifice is made when Victoria marries José María, and her family looks on in horror and grief. Another sacrifice is attempted when Daniel claims he wants to join a monastic order when she took herself out of the marriage pool. Self-sacrifice is not seen in a particularly noble way in the film; while the love of Victoria for her father is viewed in a very positive light, the film does not entertain the notion that a man would sacrifice himself.

**What is Marriage?:** The film challenges many ideas about marriage. First, is the idea that marriages start with love and then count on that in order to overcome life's challenges and to achieve an evolving, emerging vision for one's life. José María declares that marriages should begin with a powerful vision or deeply-held dream, and then, over time, love will develop from mutual respect and regard. Second, the film challenges the idea that a woman who marries would not work, but would spend her time engaged in leisure, consuming luxury goods. Instead, *La Loca de la Casa* shows Victoria in an enthusiastic, dedicated, highly professional role as an administrative assistant. She learns about the values of stocks, the nature of the business, and the key elements of contracts and business arrangements. She becomes an astute negotiator, as well as a creative, supportive partner.

**Social Construction of the Meaning of Virtue:** The film juxtaposes the presence of nuns, a convent, and elements of worship in the Catholic church with a self-made businessman who constantly expresses his rules for living and his moral code. One is an institutional source of codified virtue, while the other is a secular source of virtue, where the self-made man also creates a self-made code of virtue. José María Cruz's self-made code of virtue include such ideas as a) Never give money for nothing; b) always speak the truth; c) be frank and tell it like you see it; and d) believe in yourself ("I'm always right!"). His truth and moral code (including virtues), are socially constructed, which is to say that although they seem to suggest an essentialist approach to reality, they are actually informed by practice (praxis), and as such, virtue and the meaning of virtue as ultimately phenomenal; they arise in the phenomenal world, as a consequence of interactions and experience.

**Marriage of Convenience:** *La Loca de la Casa*, with all its symbolism and depictions of female virtue, with nurturing and kind-hearted Mother Superior, and a brood of immaculately draped novice nuns in their white habits and soft voices, also directly addresses the sordid practice of “selling” a daughter into an “arranged” marriage of convenience that conveniently rescues a family from impecunity (usually a result of generations of privilege and entitlement). It is a world where unmarried older aunts are considered as having been passed over as undesirable, and the childless woman, no matter how industrious or virtuous, has a limited amount of agency, and almost no ability to exert influence in a patriarchal culture. The apogee of her power and influence occurs when she is pregnant with her first child; the patriarchal, patrilineal social order requires a child for its very existence, and so she can use her ability to give birth to negotiate, even in areas where earlier she would not have been allowed admittance.

**Underdogs:** *La Loca de la Casa* is the story of the diminishing power of an elite family, the Moncadas, and the self-actualizing, ambitious now-adult son of a poor servant in the Moncada household. It tells the story of how the scrappy, ambitious proletariats intend to devour the refinements and grace of the now-effete elite, but that within that dynamic flowers the heart of the culture, a pure, virtuous, visionary element that will preserve the past while embracing the present. The pugnacious but ultimately loveable José María Cruz is the underdog who gets his prize, the daughter of the owners of the estates where he grew up and his parents were lowly servants. The message is populist and very satisfying to the audiences during the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema, and one can imagine their laughter as José María shouts and whoops with the “Grito” when happy, and who blurts out uncomfortable truths when he sees things he dislikes.

## CHARACTERS

Don Juan de Moncada	The patriarch of an old, elite family hit on hard times
Victoria:	Moncada’s daughter
Gabriela:	Moncada’s daughter
Doña Eulalia:	Moncada’s sister
Doña Malavella	Daniel’s mother
Sor María del Sagrario	Mother Superior of the Convent
José María Cruz:	Wealthy businessman
Daniel	In love with Victoria

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**José María Cruz:** The son of lowly servants who worked for the Moncadas, José María left home at age 18 to make his fortune. In doing so, he spent time in the jungle where he had to overcome all kinds of challenges and threats, including man-eating tigers and homicidal men. He succeeded and now is rich. He also bought the interests of the Moncada’s businesses. His dream was to come back some day and own the business, live in the grand house, and marry one of the daughters in order to mix his blood with theirs. “I’m a believer in blood and bloodlines,” he asserts.

**Crass:** Considered crass by those who are of the elite group, José María speaks without a filter, shouts, gesticulates, and refuses to modulate his voice in any way. He dresses impeccably, and is a hard worker, and well organized. However, his honesty and frankness are often considered crass by those who are not pleased by the presence of someone who has made his own millions.

**Confident:** José María is extremely confident in his own abilities, and he reinforces his self-belief in a set of rules and guidelines he has created for himself to guide him when there may be any ambiguity or doubt. His confidence also gives him self-restraint. For example, when Daniel picks up a sharp small knife used for opening letters and moves to attack José María, he refuses to be baited. He tells Daniel, “It’s not worth it!” and steps away. His confidence also enables him to tell Victoria that “you’ll never regret marrying me; I promise!” when she agrees to marry him.

*Hot-tempered:* José María expresses himself in an unabashed, unapologetic way. In this sense, he is the quintessential “macho.” Yet, he has complete control over himself. He does not drink alcohol, nor does he have other vices, so that it becomes clear that the “hot tempered” nature is actually an expression of generative energy and dynamism, and is part of the Mexican identity that values passion, hard work, focus, and spunk.

#### QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. In what way do the comical scenes in *La Loca de la Casa* serve to differentiate authenticity from pretentiousness? When José María Cruz expresses his business philosophies to the individuals seeking donations, what are some of his observations about how and why charity can often do more harm than good? How do his effusive yelps, whoops, and shouts of joy reinforce his character and portray spontaneity?
2. Describe three instances in which Victoria negotiates concessions or behaviors from José María. What do they say about the nature of power and influence? How and when does Victoria actually have all the elements of power and that, in reality, José María is asking her for concessions?
3. Describe the appearance of the office and the living quarters in the factory? What do they tell the viewer about possibilities in terms of a) reinvented marriage relationships; b) work—life balance and integration; c) luxury vs utilitarianism.
4. Describe the appearance of the mansion where the Moncada’s live. Please list the furnishings and describe their appearance. What does the assortment of furniture, architectural details, and décor tell the audience about the values of the people who live there?
5. What kind of father is Don Juan Moncada? Please describe how and why he behaves the way he does to José María Cruz. Describe his feelings and behavior toward his daughters; when does his seem to express gratitude and why? When does he express shame and why? Finally, describe his attitude toward José María Cruz when he first meets him again, and then later, after José María and Victoria are married.