

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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RETURN TO YOUTH / A la Juventud (1954)

Juan Bustillo Oro

TO VIEW: [_ https://youtu.be/ ZxZgv4Ac5o](https://youtu.be/ZxZgv4Ac5o)

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OVERVIEW

Retorno a la Juventud is Juan Bustillo Oro's highly acclaimed tour de force of surrealism and philosophical inquiry about the nature of dreams, desire, hallucinogenic projection, and reality as it traces the fate of an aging and loveless professor, Juan Gaudio, overcome by an extreme and precipitous case of *amour fou* (mad love). His hopeless crush on a lovely, young student, Inés Montecruz, triggers a Faustian bargain to restore himself to his youthful self, which has terrible consequences as the young self is an evil, dishonorable doppelganger who ravages women and murders people who get in the way with not even the slightest sense of remorse or conscience. Bustillo Oro takes the avant-garde Expressionistic work of his *Dos Monjes (Two Monks)* to an even deeper level, one which self-consciously incorporates Freudian and Jungian ideas about dreams, consciousness, and reality. In doing so, he creates intelligent visual references to Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí (*Chien Andalou*, 1929), and Jean Cocteau (*Blood of a Poet*, 1930). The surrealist scenes are typified by oneiric (dream) images which punctuate the narrative of the film, and create a contrast to the dialogue of many of the characters who speak in very direct, concrete ways. Their empirical reality, juxtaposed with the subjective, vision-based perceptions of realities that are triggered by desire, remorse, shame, and guilt. The film is remarkable for its surrealist cinematography and also to its philosophical questions that use the condition of *amour fou* to probe the mysteries of life itself.

SYNOPSIS

Retorno a la Juventud (Return to Youth) begins in the lecture hall of a university where young men and women sit in their desks and take notes as Professor Juan Gaudio discusses the intersection of dreams and reality. He then makes a statement that is repeated several times in the film and becomes a unifying theme. "Dreams often turn into reality; likewise, reality can become a dream or a hallucination." He then quotes Freud, Shakespeare, and other writers. As Professor Gaudio speaks, he catches the attention of one young student, Inés Montecruz, who looks at him with open, unblinking eyes. He interprets her attention as interest; in reality, she suffers from test anxiety and is worried about the upcoming exams. Prof. Gaudio offers to give her a tutoring session, to which she eagerly agrees. When she arrives, she is dressed in a formal evening gown and not able to stay for more than a few minutes. Prof. Gaudio is severely disappointed, but tries to forestall her inevitable departure. He caresses her, to which she recoils, and makes the comment that if his younger self (the self-depicted in the portrait on the wall) were making advances, she would swoon with delight. She bids him goodbye, after which he is left feeling devastated. At his lowest moment, a demonic figure enters the room and offers to allow him to change places with his younger self. Prof. Gaudio eagerly agrees, and suddenly, the young Gaudio appears, while the figure in the portrait is now older and in the final stages of his life. As the switch is made, there is the sound of squealing brakes outside and Professor Gaudio has been run over and killed by a motorist. What happens in the rest of the film is not what one might expect. The young version of Gaudio is a Dr. Gaudio, a psychiatrist with a private practice. Instead of being the restrained, honorable professor who has never had a relationship with a woman, Dr. Gaudio, the psychiatrist, is a dishonorable libertine who uses his psychiatrist's couch to hypnotize and ravage his patients, who consist exclusively of young, beautiful women.

Gaudio's nurse is well aware of what he does, and calls him out, but it is ineffectual. Gaudio is a scoundrel with an execrable reputation, and now, with the single-minded goal of seducing and marrying Inés. Inés becomes his patient, and he manages to have her believe she is in love with him and agree to marry. To force the issue, he wants to make sure she is in a compromising position with him all night. Her father becomes aware, and does his best to prevent the situation, but cannot do so. On the road to achieving his goal of marrying Inés and living together with her for the rest of eternity in connubial bliss, Dr. Gaudio murders at least two people: His nurse and Inés's father. But, did that actually happen? Each scene of violence or passion is abruptly interrupted by surrealist scenes where clouds, crashing waves, tombstones, or flights of symbols and images suffuse the screen, and individuals become silhouettes, shadowy vestiges of themselves, or grotesquely distorted synechdochal presences. Along the way, Dr. Gaudio becomes aware that he is returning to Professor Gaudio, and the process of accelerated aging means he is rotting from inside out. The end represents a tragic denouement for the ignited dreams and hope for anyone, and an experience of *amour fou* as a quintessential life experience: how the longing for the impossible ultimately shames one by reminding them of their mortal limits. At the same time, it is a moment of extreme exhilaration, a "limit experience" that suggests that one is tapping into the life force itself, even as one balances on the knife edge of death. The film ends as two students who have come to mourn the untimely death of Inés Montecruz discover the inert, dead form of Professor Gaudio, fallen on the freshly-dug grave, next to the flowers heaped up for her.

STORY

In the lecture hall. Professor Gaudio, a specialist and expert in psychology, is standing on a podium behind a lectern as he explains historical and literary ideas about the psychology of dreams, and the relationship between dreams and reality. His students are listening, but one stands out to Professor Gaudio. She is Inés Montecruz, a lovely young student, who looks at him with intensity. He is intrigued. Unbeknownst to Professor Gaudio, who mistakes her intense stare and her tarrying after class to complete her notes in her notebook for interest in him as a man, Inés suffers from test anxiety and is trying to understand a subject she finds confusing. Professor Gaudio approaches her and offers to give her one-on-one tutoring, to which she eagerly agrees (but not for the reasons he thinks).



A study session cut short: Inés arrives, breathless and distracted. She is not in normal study attire, but instead is wearing a ballgown as she is on her way to a formal dance. She apologizes that she will only have a few moments to study. Gaudio is quite disappointed and tries to cajole her into staying. He bares his soul and approaches her. She recoils, much to his chagrin, and as she does so, she catches sight of a portrait of a young man. She exclaims – “chispa!” which can be loosely translated as “Cool! What a hottie!” and then goes on to say that she would fall in love in a minute with him. She is teasing him because she knows it is Gaudio as a young man, and it is her way of saying that he is attractive, but they’re just out of sync in terms of age. Gaudio does not take it that way.



“I’d sell my soul to Mephistopheles to go back in time!” As he says this, Cenicéfalo approaches and warns him: “Don’t joke about the Devil. He exists.” And a demon appears. It is interesting that Cinocéfalo makes the comment because his name literally means “dog-headed” or “Jackal-headed,” which could be Anubis, the Egyptian jackal-headed god of the dead. A Faustian bargain: If he enters into a compact with the Devil, he will be able to be transformed into a young man. It seems like a good idea at the time, but little does Professor Gaudio suspect that he will be drawn down a path of chaos and reality disruption.

Demon makes a deal. Gaudio is not aware of the accident because he is too busy doing business with the Devil to restore his youth. He can’t believe it at first, and continues to squeeze his arms and look at the mirror. The camera work shows multiple representations of him in the bathroom mirror, which also suggests a divided self, which is certainly the case in the of Gaudio, who is now split between the respectable Prof. Gaudio and the young Dr. Gaudio.



Young and old Gaudio change places. The young Doppelganger Dr. Gaudio is a psychiatrist rather than venerable professor. The portrait now shows a white-haired, white-bearded man. Time passes. Cinocéfalo comments on Gaudio's horrific reputation – complete libertine; the reverse of Professor Gaudio. Dr. Gaudio's patients are exclusively beautiful young women, and the nurse is instructed to make sure that the blinds are lowered and that the light is positioned to maximize the effectiveness of the hypnotic process. Gaudio hypnotizes Inés with the idea of seducing her and encouraging her to marry him. She begs for forgiveness, saying it was her fault that Professor Gaudio died. He plays on her guilt and asks her to marry him. She agrees. The nurse observes what is happening and makes a scathing indictment. Dr. Gaudio's response is to suffocate her with a pillow. After he does that, the camera cuts to a surreal vision.

Don Gonzalo forbids the relationship in order to protect his daughter. Dr. Gaudio mocks Don Gonzalo as Don Gonzalo threatens Gaudio with harm if he tries to hurt her or seduce her. However, his protestations are futile. Dr. Gaudio kidnaps Inés (she thinks they're getting married with her father's blessing). They go to a remote place where Inés will stay the night with Dr. Gaudio and be "ruined" (perhaps forcing Don Gonzalo to relent). Don Gonzalo follows them, brandishes a gun. There is a struggle and Don Gonzalo is shot in the head. At that moment, the camera cuts to a surreal scene.



He enters heaven and sees he is in a surreal cemetery. There is a gravestone with the name Inés Montecruz. He is confused. The scenario becomes even more surreal, with crosses, swirling clouds, and what seems to be a beach with water / waves crashing in. Taken again on a journey to a surrealist cemetery, Gaudio sees a new tombstone. This one has the name of Inés Montecruz, which is a tremendous shock



Cut to bright daylight and two young students are walking into a cemetery. One is carrying a large wreath. They are discussing the death of Inés Montecruz. As they look at the grave, they notice a crumpled body lying on the grave, face-down. They recognize it as Professor Gaudio. "He would not leave after the ceremony, they say. Personally, I did not like the way he looked at her in class. He must have been completely in love with her. Next to the heap of flowers over Inés's grave lies the body of Professor Gaudio. He has not moved from the gravesite since her funeral, and after a full day and night, he collapsed onto her grave, dead.



THEMES

Love / Amour fou: When love hits him, it hits him hard, and he is completely possessed by an obsessive love that causes him to throw all caution out the window and pursue the object of his passion. It is a “mad love,” called “amour fou” in French, which, for all its damaging consequences, holds the keys to unlocking the true mysteries of life itself. Although the ultimate outcome is death, for once in his life, Professor Gaudio experiences what could even be characterized as a mystical journey. It is new territory, for up to now, Professor Gaudio has lived an entire life as a scholar and a spartan, whose primary interactions are with his personal assistant, Cinocéfalo, and his students who attend his lectures. A reserved, organized man, he is not discontent with his situation until he is gripped by it, as his psychology class lecture includes the theory that dreams can invade one’s reality, while reality may devolve into dreams (or hallucinations or psychosis).

Obsession: Once possessed by his *amour fou*, Professor Gaudio is obsessed by his passion for his young student, Inés Montecruz. When she almost jokingly points out that she would have fallen in love with his younger self (as depicted in a portrait), he allows his obsession to overtake him, to the point he makes a pact with the Devil to return to youth. Later in the film it is clear that his obsession has caused him to summon his own demons, and that the Devil or the demon is nothing other than himself, and that he caused it to happen. He has entered the world of dreams, and the rest of the film explores what Freud referred to as “Dreamwork” in which aspects once unknown to oneself are revealed. The Dreamwork lays bare long suppressed aspects of Gaudio’s personality – which is split off into an unintegrated Doppelgänger. The Doppelgänger (evil twin) is Gaudio’s younger self, which is utterly dominated by lustful urges and unmediated desire. Professor Gaudio is the SuperEgo controller; the younger Dr. Gaudio is pure Id, which is to say raw, primitive urge which has no self-control or self-regulation. The only behavior regulator is external: Don Gonzalo comes to stop Gaudio from ravaging his daughter, but fails. However, the husband of a woman whom Gaudio has seduced does manage to stop him by shooting him.

Delusion / Reality: The strange experiences that could be delusions or hallucinations call into question concepts of reality. What is reality? Where do reality and hallucination merge? What causes the confusion? The first sign that reality is no longer an empirically-measurable concept occurs when the “demon” emerges and offers Gaudio the opportunity to be young again and to live life over. Gaudio eagerly embraces the opportunity, and although he preys upon all his patients (all of whom are young, female, and beautiful), he never loses sight of Inés whom he truly wants to love, marry, merge with. The film calls into question the notion of reality and suggests that human desire can supercede the senses because they can distort perception and place events within a framework that is “super-real” because it suggests the inner truths of the human condition as well as the external world we operate in. Underneath the calm, cool exterior of a long-disappointed, shy and retiring professor was the raging Lothario, the insatiable scoundrel who deeply longed to go down a path of self-destruction if only it would yield a union and a final unity / sense of completion or wholeness to a life dedicated to compartmentalizing and disciplining itself.

Aging / Old Age: Although quite well-groomed and well-preserved, there is no doubt that Professor Gaudio is at the end of his working career, and is considered old. His sudden “mad love” / *amour fou* for his student triggers the realization that his life will soon be over and he will never have experience. What triggers the desire to summon the demon and have his youth restored is the rueful contemplation of aging and approaching the end of one’s life. In this sense, the film explores the universal anxiety about aging, and it triggers existential shame upon realizing that one may be rejected for a condition that cannot be remedied (without summoning a demon).

CHARACTERS

Juan Gaudio	Psychology professor at the university / psychiatrist at a clinic
Inez Montecruz	Student in Prof. Gaudio's course; the object of Juan Gaudio's obsession
Don Gonzalo	Inez's father
Cinocéfalo	Juan Gaudio's personal assistant (the name means dog-headed and evokes Anubis, the Egyptian jackal-headed god of the dead)
Enfermera	Nurse at the young Dr. Gaudio's clinic who is disgusted by his behavior
Licenciado	Attorney who attributes the young Dr. Gaudio's inheritance to the work of the Devil

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Juan Gaudio: At the beginning of the film, Juan Gaudio is a professor of psychology at the university. He is reserved, eloquent, and well-dressed. However, during one lecture he is struck by "amour fou" which possesses him as would a demon spirit. The "mad love" catapults him into a different reality, one in which he is painfully aware that his advancing age has made love with a nubile young student more or less an impossibility, and his long-suppressed urges, desires, and quite human attributes now surge to the surface. Entering into an uncertain realm where reality is at best vexed, Gaudio summons a demon who restores him to his youth. From that point on, Gaudio works as psychiatrist who hypnotizes his patients and then takes advantage of them.

Madness: Struck by "mad love," the previously reserved and eminently logical university professor enters into what can only be described as an obsession, where he demonstrates a fixed and unwavering determination to convince Inés Montecruz to marry him. In addition to his obsession, he also seems to have a belief that Inés reciprocates (she doesn't). That makes him also a sufferer of delusional disorder; namely erotomania. Later, in what appears to be an evil twin / Doppelganger, the professors' double, the young Dr. Gaudio is a psychopathic predator of women, violating his patients by hypnotizing them and sexually assaulting them. He has no conscious.

Dreams: Juan Gaudio enters into many flights of wakeful dreaming that constitute an exploration of the unconscious and the part of the mind where the irrational and emotional merge to help sculpt the human psyche. There are recurrent symbols in the dreams, in scenes highly reminiscent of the filmography of surrealists Jean Cocteau, Salvador Dali, Luis Buñuel and also of German Expressionism (Friedrich Murnau, Fritz Lang). The symbols are archetypal in the Jungian sense, and they include swirling clouds and water, shadow / light, crucifixes, silhouettes of male figures, and vertiginous spinning. What happens in the dreams is illustrative of what happens to a man facing old age never having partaken of love or life itself, and shows the emotions that have been suppressed over the years. The "Dreamwork" that Freud wrote about takes place for the audience as they observe the Doppelganger, the "young Gaudio" who is pure, untrammelled lust, desire, and appetite. While these are negative qualities when unintegrated and compartmentalized, they are positive in an integrated self. Poor Professor Gaudio has not integrated his passions into his full, conscious self, and so pays a dreadful price when suddenly confronted with them, and the sense of his impending mortality and wasted time.

Love / Lust: In theory, what Professor Gaudio is feeling for Inés is a manifestation of pent-up love, a kind of true love that one might see in works of literature such as Dante's *Vita Nuova*. However, in reality, it is an obsessive love which is heightened to tragic proportions when he realizes that she finds Gaudio of 40 years ago (his portrait) very attractive (although she is joking with him), but not the current grandfatherly Professor Gaudio. The bubbling up of lust is intensified after Gaudio summons a demon who promptly offers a Faustian bargain for restored youth. Youth is restored, but at the expense of sanity and common decency, as the young Gaudio is a lustful double for the idealistic Professor Gaudio.

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. When Professor Gaudio is lecturing, he is describing the fact that reality often is confused with dreams, and that dreams often become reality. This passage appears more than one place in the film. Please find the places in which dreams and reality are clearly called into question, and explain what is happening at the time. What do these passages suggest about the nature of reality? About human perception and ways of developing intuitive knowledge?
2. Symbols in the dream sequences suggest elements in the unconscious that have been long suppressed. What are some of the scenes with signs and symbols? Please describe how they appear. What are some of the possible interpretations? How could the swirling clouds and surging tides suggest transition? What are some of the symbols that suggest repressed desires and emotions? Please describe the scenes.
3. Dr. Gaudio is a “Mr. Hyde” to Professor Gaudio’s “Dr. Jekyll.” He is also “The Monster” to Mary Shelley’s Dr. Frankenstein. Why is the presence of untrammelled, unrestrained urge and desire so intriguing to audiences? What are the inner conflicts that are exposed in this dialectic? Please provide examples.
4. Inés Montecruz illustrates the plight of a woman who is considered beautiful, desirable, and something to possess. Identify the ways in which characters in the film attempt to possess or at least control Inés. Explain how her lack of agency reveals some of the mysteries of life and how there is an ebb and flow of energy, and a push / pull tug of war between genders, selves, and even demon spirits invoked within own’s own psyche at points of maximum despair and crisis.