

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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KILLER X / El Asesino X (1955)

Juan Bustillo Oro

Genre: Drama / Film Noir

Link: <https://youtu.be/Jaup34i0c9c>

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OVERVIEW

With *El Asesino X*, Juan Bustillo Oro explores the dark emotions of shame, revenge, and regret alongside a stoic acceptance of the consequences of his own quest for justice. He accomplishes the representation of intensity and film noir by means of his Expressionist techniques that create a world of shadows, hidden presences, and fragmented, shattered worlds and psyches. The story is told by a defense attorney who tries to understand the strange case of a man who confessed to a treacherous, cold-blooded murder, but who will not, under any circumstances give his name or details of his life, preferring to claim he cannot remember. While the plot has a mystery and has some elements of crime drama, it is more than anything a humanizing exploration of what seems to be a cold, heartless assassin, until finally one comes to know his story. It is also a paean to the steadfast love of mothers and sisters, who, even after 20 years of loss, maintain hope that they will see their son and brother. Far from rejecting him because he is a self-professed murderer, when his mother sees his photograph in the newspaper, she does everything she can to travel from her hometown of Morelia, Mexico, to the prison in southern California, where he is incarcerated. The film explores existential solitude and loss, along with the state of longing for unity, both of which are visually expressed through the lighting and cinematography, using shadows and light, chiaroscuro, bisected images, and lines and crosses. The negative spaces, such as the shadows and the dark of night, represent the unknown and the unknowable, and hint at a nihilistic vision of existence where the only redemption is through a mother's faithful and non-judgmental love.

SYNOPSIS

The film starts as director of a prison asks if the prisoner they just executed the night before left any kind of confession or indication about his case. There is nothing. Then, the narrative takes us back in time, and a mysterious man in a hat and beige trenchcoat enters a phone booth to make a call to set a trap that will lure a man to an apartment. A mysterious man in a hat and beige trenchcoat enters a phone booth to make a call to set a trap that will lure a man to an apartment. Once there, the mysterious man kicks a gun to the stranger and asks him to pick it up so he can kill him in self defense. The man protests and entreats him: "I'm not as guilty as you think I am." The words enrage the mysterious man in the trench coat and he shoots him three times in the head. And thus kicks off the saga of a man, Killer X, who goes straightaway to the police station to confess his crime, but when asked his name and details, he claims a total loss of memory. The police gladly lock him up, but they have no idea of motive, or if there is anything more connected to this mysterious, nameless killer. From their location in California, they recognize that he speaks English with a Mexican accent. Newspapers announce the heinous crime and the fact it was perpetrated by a Mexican national. In Morelia, an elderly woman and her adult daughter read the headlines. Even though he has been gone for 20 years, the mother is convinced Prisoner X is her son, Carlos. It is, in fact, her son, who fled an abusive father, and started making a living supplying addicts with drugs. He was ashamed and did not want his family to know, so never returned. To change his life, he fought in the Korean War, even saving a

gravely wounded soldier's life. While he was in Korea, a business partner told Carlos's fiancée that he had been killed in action. He seduced her, then brutally murdered her. When Carlos learned of it, when he returned to the States, he did everything in his power to avenge her death, even if doing so meant paying with his life. Before his execution, Carlos is reunited with his mother and sister, and they expressed their love for him.

STORY

A CRIME IS COMMITTED The mysterious stranger shoots the man who responded to the name, Jack Francis. Just before the stranger shoots him, Jack Francis says, "I'm not as guilty as you think I am." Apparently, that was the wrong thing to say. The angle point of view shot is characteristic of Mexican Expressionism, which Bustillo Oro pioneered, and also characteristic of film noir.



POLICE STATION *The killer* goes to the nearest police station and turns himself in. "I've killed a man." Mr. X confesses to the crime, and does not miss any details. However, Mr. X has no answers. Mr. X can not give any details of his life, his name, his work, or his family.



LAWYER SEARCHING Alcalde Harrison García reviews the files of a case he just completed that dealt with a man who confessed to a murder, but who would never give his name, or say anything about the case or himself except that he could remember nothing. Harrison García took on his defense because he sensed that there was something good about the man, and that there must have been extenuating circumstances.



IN MORELIA, MEXICO, A MOTHER AND HER DAUGHTER WONDER Gruesome headlines reach all the way to Morelia, Mexico: Newspapers carry the news that a mysterious Mexican man suffering from amnesia committed a gruesome crime. Elderly woman reads the newspaper, looks at the photo, then looks up. They look at a photo on the mantel. It is the photo of her son who disappeared 20 years ago and was never seen or heard from again.





THE TRIAL *A defense attorney believes in his client's fundamental goodness:* There is something about Prisoner X that makes Harrison García want to defend him in a court of law. Prisoner X refuses to cooperate on many different levels. First, he still claims amnesia. Second he refuses to do anything that would be even the least bit exculpatory. The defense has found a man who knew Prisoner X. They served together in the U.S. Army in Korea. The witness describes having been gravely wounded, and that Prisoner X, at terrible risk to himself and his own safety, carried the wounded man on his back to a place where he could get medical attention. He wanted to thank Prisoner X, but never had the chance. He did not learn his name, but he would recognize his face and aspect anywhere, he said.



CONFESSION WITH THE PRIEST A kind-hearted priest wishes to talk to Prisoner X and to provide him the chance for a final confession. And, so he tells his story. The prisoner tells that ran away to escape an abusive father. He made his way across the border to the U.S. and he liked the adventure. He earned a living however a 13 year old could – by selling drugs to addicts, and other things. He was in love with a young woman and engaged to marry when he enlisted in the Army. While he was in Korea, a man he worked with told his fiancée that he had been killed. He also tricked her and sexually assaulted her. Later, he killed her in a brutal way. When Prisoner X returned home from Korea, he learned the tragic, terrible news. He became obsessed with avenging her death, and would stop at nothing.



MOTHER AND DAUGHTER MEET ASESINO X Prisoner X knows that it is his mother and his sister. He cannot let them know because he does not want them to spend the rest of their days thinking that the son and brother they love so much is a killer. He then tells them that he knew the man they seek. “He died in Korea, where he heroically saved my life,” explains Prisoner X. “Your son died a hero. He was brave, noble, and kind,” says Prisoner X.



EXECUTION Carlos Encinas (Prisoner X) walks down the hallway to the execution chamber. The hallway is criss-crossed with shadows, fragmenting them and giving a sense of existential solitude. At his side is the priest who is reading him the last rites. As the priest reads him the last rights, Prisoner X, Carlos Encinas, walks stoically to the death chamber. With the prison bars behind them, a light shines down from above, almost like a ray of light from God, and yet, there is still a shadow over Carlos's face.



THEMES

Identity: Because of Prisoner X's dogged refusal to reveal anything about his name, his life, or his origins, the issue of identity is one of the primary themes in the movie. Prisoner X is known only for his crime, and not for his name or reputation. When he first insists that he does not remember his name or his background, it is not credible, and his defense attorney, Harrison García, wonders if he has psychological issues that would lead to a psychotic break. That is not the case, and Harrison García senses a deep inner pain that the prisoner faces with stoic silence. Without an identity, Prisoner X is essentially a blank, a cipher, and a blank slate upon which people can project what they want.

Justice: We learn that Prisoner X is a complex individual. While he killed a man in cold blood, he will not say why. We later learn that he served in the Korean War, where he saved the life of a gravely wounded fellow soldier by carrying him on his back, out of danger and to where he could receive medical attention. He seems to have a great desire to right the wrongs of the world. The person he murdered had, while Prisoner X was fighting in Korea, savagely raped and murdered his fiancée. As Prisoner X recounted the story to the prison priest, it is clear that he believed that no sacrifice was too high to make sure that justice was carried out.

Compassion: Although they know that Prisoner X killed a man, Harrison García and the priest sense that he has noble, honorable desires for justice. They feel compassion for the stoic man who will not give his name. Eventually, they realize that Prisoner X is too tormented by guilt and shame to open up and tell the full story. Their compassion for him makes them entreat the governor for a stay of execution so that he can see the mother and daughter who believe they are his mother and sister.

Maternal Love: Señora Encinas is the woman who sees a photo of the man from Mexico who will not give his name and wonders if it might be her son, who left home because of his violent,

abusive father twenty years before. Her love has not wavered, and she does not even want to know why he never contacted the family again, or what he was doing. When she is told the story of her son's heroic rescue of a fellow soldier in Korea, she knows it is the truth. It seems that both she and her daughter realize that it is Carlos, and that he is, at heart, a good man, and that a sense of shame at how he earned a living kept him from going home. As in other films by Bustillo Oro, the mother is the exemplar of core Mexican values, and she is what functions as a bedrock.

Shame: Prisoner X does not give his name because he does not want his family to be tainted with the idea that their long-lost son is a treacherous killer. Before that, he stayed away because he did not want his mother to know that he had started earning a living by selling drugs in the U.S. He did not want the family to be saddled with that stigma, and he did not want his mother to worry and weep for him. As a consequence, Prisoner X spent years in profound sadness and solitude, punctuated only by his meeting the woman he would fall in love with, but who was deceived when he was in Korea.

CHARACTERS

Alcalde Harrison García	The defense attorney
Carlos Encinas	Killer X – the man who confesses a murder but not his name
Señora Encinas	An aging mother in Morelia, Mexico
María Encinas	The daughter of the aging mother in Morelia
Fiscal	The prosecuting attorney
Padre Juan	The priest who speaks to Killer X before

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Carlos Encinas: Although we learn it much later in the film, the protagonist of the film, Carlos Encinas was born in Morelia, Mexico, where he was regularly beaten by his abusive father. One day, when he was a young teen, Carlos ran away from home to escape the abuse. When we meet Carlos, he is setting up a situation where he will murder a man in cold blood. The film explores the psychological interior of Carlos and unveils not only the mystery of why he killed, but also his existential condition of shame, loss, and a stoic stance toward loneliness and longing.

Seeker of Justice: Carlos Encinas killed the man who raped and savagely killed his fiancée. When he learned the identity of his fiancée's killer, he will stop at nothing to kill him. However, instead of being happy that he was able to carry out vigilante justice, he is stoic and grim. His sense of justice extends to himself, and he must turn himself in so that justice can be served for what he did.

Self-sacrificing: Carlos Encinas is self-sacrificing. He did not return home because he did not want to ruin the life of his mother and sister because he knew that if they were considered the relative of a drug dealer, they would be shunned. In Korea, he sacrifices his safety and possibly his life to carry a gravely injured fellow soldier to where he could receive medical treatment. Finally, he sacrifices his life in order to kill the killer of his fiancée.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. The movie opens with a nameless man entering a phone booth and making a phone call. He then goes through various actions to trap his victim. Describe his clothing and his behavior, as well as the setting. How do they affect the mood of the film? What does the fact it takes place at night do to influence the viewers' perceptions?
2. Describe the ways in which the film could be considered film noir. Include the use of lighting, the vertical and crisscrossing shadows, the chiaroscuro effects, and the camera angles. How does the film capture the "dark" side of human nature?

3. Much of the film takes place inside. Describe the different inside scenes: phone booth, apartment building, the apartment itself, hallways in the jail, Harrison García's office, the courtroom, and the room in the jail where Carlos Encinas meets his mother and sister. How does each room reflect what is going on inside the character's mind and emotions?
4. Harrison Garcia is convinced of Prisoner X's essential innocence, even though Prisoner X has confessed to the crime, and then will say nothing more. In what way might Prisoner X be worthy of being exonerated for his crime? How does the film suggest that Prisoner X believes he must accept the guilt and the punishment for the crime?
5. Discuss the role of shame in the film, *El Asesino X*. How does shame keep Carlos from being in touch with his family? How does shame potentially figure into his original decision to leave home at the age of 13? How might he feel guilt and shame about the death of his fiancée, even though he did not have anything to do with the actual death?