

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Susan Smith Nash, Ph.D.

THE CRIME MEDALLION – THE GOLD 13

El Medallon Del Crimen - El 13 De Oro (1956)

Juan Bustillo Oro

Genre : Drama / Film Noir

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

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OVERVIEW

El Medallón del Crimen (El 13 de Oro), brings together Juan Bustillo Oro's expressionistic techniques and a soundtrack saturated with jazz and ambient sound (New Year's Eve fireworks, for example) to create a film noir classic that explores the consequences of a chance encounter of two people who are deeply attached to a certain custom-designed gold and diamond brooch, the number 13 in the middle of a circle. The gold brooch brings together a gangster and his kept woman, and a meek family man, tipsy and foolish from his office mates' New Year's Eve celebrations. Raul, whose idealism makes him naïve, stumbles into a very dangerous night where he is blamed for a series of murders, and pursued by the gangster killer himself. The cinematography, fast pace, and immersion into Mexico City nightclubs, streets, and upscale apartments at night set the stage as the viewer relates to the poor decisions of the Mexican Everyman, whose naivete puts him and his family at risk.

"The Brooch of Crime" (The Gold 13), is a wonderful example of Mexican film noir, which incorporates the techniques of Hollywood film noir, in the chiaroscuro lighting, abundant shadows, harsh artificial lights at night, over-the-shoulder shots that give the viewer as sense of intimacy, as the story concerns itself with dark aspects of human nature: succumbing to temptation, weakness, and violence.

SYNOPSIS

Raul González is a mild-mannered, devoted family man who lives for his wife, María and his son, Carlitos. He wants more than anything to give his wife the gold and diamond-paved brooch in the shape of the number 13 in the middle of a circle that he designed for her. However, he does not earn a great deal in his office job, and they suffered financial setbacks. Thus, he was not able to pay for it, and it was sold by the jeweler. On New Year's Eve, Raul is convinced to go to an upscale restaurant, The Rat-Catcher (or, Mouse Trap), with his festive office mates. As he drinks with them, he sees a woman wearing the very same brooch he had to surrender. He approaches her, and she misinterprets his attentions and assumes he is interested in her. She invites him to her apartment, explaining she can stand no more of her lying cad of a boyfriend, who has deceived her in everything, even his name. She tells Raul her name is María, and he is astonished at the coincidence, and tells her the story of the brooch and explains that his wife, the love of his life, is named María. She gives him the brooch. He gives her his tie pin, which has the initial R. Very drunk, he slurs and staggers, wanting to dance. Their encounter is interrupted by a phone call and the arrival of Ramon, the gangster boyfriend, who immediately suspects her and pulls out his gun, as an inducement for her to tell him what happened. She struggles for the gun and is accidentally shot. She dies. Ramon and his associate dispose of the body in a car parked on the street with a car door still wide open. Coincidentally, it is Raul's car. As the gangster eliminates witnesses, Raul must deal with his wife, and then, the discovery of the mysterious

woman's body in the back of his car. His desperate attempts to get rid of the body set him up to be accused of that crime as well the murder of the owner of a corner pharmacy and a neighbor, who happened to have a first name that begins with "R." Almost defeated, Raul sets a trap with the murdered Maria's sister, and happily, it works. The film ends with the arrest of the gangster.

STORY

GANGASTER Two men, quite different, are about to enter onto a collision course that will affect their lives and their futures. *The first was a gangster.* Luís Jiménez (pseudonym for Ramón Torres, a notorious crime boss and gangster) meets with his associates in an auto repair shop which doubles as a hub for criminal activities. They are wearing suits that were characteristic of gangsters. Luís Jiménez / Ramón Torres shoots a member of the gang who was accused of cheating or stealing. He shoots him after punching him and beating him around the face. Luís / Ramón is a stone cold killer.



FAMILY MAN A happy family on New Year's Eve clusters around the dinner table, where María, the wife, is telling her husband, Raul, how much she loves him. Little Carlitos, the son, is happy that it's New Year's Eve and looking forward to the New Year, when he will receive his presents. Raul loves his family, but regrets that he does not earn more and cannot give his wife what he wants her to have. He also mentions the loss of a child. Raul Gonzáles, a real estate company employee, who will cross paths with the gangster Ramón Torres in a twist of fate, is drinking champagne with his coworkers in the office to celebrate New Year's Eve and the bonus in the amount of 2 months of salary.

THE OFFICE PARTY The camera takes us down city streets to the Zócalo. This is Raul's office, a real estate company that specializes in affordable homes. He works a desk job, and prepares reports on properties. The boss is delighted with the year's performance, and is breaking out the champagne. He is also handing out bonuses. Raul receives two full months of salary as a bonus. He waxes emotional and poetic with his colleagues and describes the brooch he designed for his wife, but was not able to purchase due to extraordinary expenses. "It is shaped around the number 13, he explains to his audience who nod, already familiar with the story. June 13 is their wedding date, and Raul has earrings with 13 – and gold matching brooch – gold with diamonds. He dreams of perhaps being able to finally getting the brooch for his wife. *Alone with his bonus check*, and a glass of champagne still at his side, he offers a toast to their little boy who died, and for the son who still lives. Just as he's getting ready to go home, his office mates appear at his desk and urge him to accompany them to a restaurant. They leave, boisterous and in high spirits, to a fancy restaurant, "La Ratonera" (The Rat Trap" up to his desk and accompanies office mates to restaurant – all are quite tipsy.



THE RESTAURANT “*La Ratonera*” – (*The Mousetrap*) appeals to the celebratory office comrades because it’s elegant and usually not a place that they would go. Raul’s office mates are admiring the beautiful women, but Raul says he has eyes only for his wife. That all goes by the wayside when Raul sees a woman who is wearing the very same brooch that he designed for his wife. He staggers to her, sits down and starts to ask about her brooch. Unused to drinking, the inebriated Raul speaks to a beautiful but sad young woman who wears the very same brooch that Raul designed for his wife, María, but was not able to pay for, and so the jeweler put it up for sale at the public



WOMEN'S APARTMENT The mysterious woman invites him to her home, and tells him to be discrete and to not be followed. He confusedly goes along with it all, taking his heap of a car to her apartment, parking on the street, and leaving the door open. He’s totally drunk, but somehow it seems to fit the mood of New Year’s Eve, with firecrackers popping everywhere (just like gunshots) and the sound of jazz. The strange, unhappy woman in the restaurant who is wearing the brooch Raul designed for his wife, María, invites Raul to her apartment. Raul accepts because he is captivated by the brooch and is extremely inebriated. He finds out her name is also María and that her boyfriend’s real name begins with R, just as his does.



BOY FRIEND Ramón Torres, who first introduced himself to María as Luis Jimenez, the boyfriend, calls from the corner drugstore. He wants to get something from a safe, and is angry, bad-tempered. María shoves Raul into her sister's apartment across the hall. He promptly goes to sleep (alcoholic stupor). When he comes to, he has no idea where he is, but then slowly comes to realize what happened. Luis comes in, smells cigar. He suspects Maria had a man in the apartment. María does everything she can to erase all evidence of the fact that she had invited Raul into her gangster boyfriend's "love nest," but she fails. He smells the smoke. He finds a cigar in the ashtray. Then, he finds the tie pin with the initial "R." He pulls a gun and threatens her, "I should kill you for this." She grabs the gun, wrestles with him, and causes the gun to discharge, unfortunately, into her chest. She dies, but only after Ramón's frantic calls to every medical person he knows.



CAR WITH A CORPSE After he realizes she has died and there is no point in continuing to call his medical contacts, Luis becomes calm, cold, and collected. The order of the day is to dispose of the body. With his sidekick, Luis drags her body around. They come across a car with door wide open parked on the street. He immediately suspects it was from the man who followed María's siren song to the apartment. Poetic justice, he suggests. He's right.



RETURN OF THE CORPSE Raul thinks it's a fine idea to return María's dead body to her apartment. It is not clear why he thinks that he will not be detected, and that the blood that must be by now pooled up in his car, and smeared all over his clothes, car, and her body. He manages to get her up to the apartment. But, it's not smooth sailing. He runs into María's sister, and he tells her what happened.



LOOKING FOR THE "R" – In the meantime, Ramón, the killer, is hunting the person who had been with María. He has the tie pin with the initial, "R" and he has María's final words. He is able to find the street, but is still not sure. Ramón Torres and his gang kill the wrong "R." They were informed that one of the residents in the neighborhood where Raul lives has a name beginning with "R." They kill him as he is walking on the sidewalk in a drive-by shooting.



THE TRAP FOR THE GANGASTER Ramón and his henchmen discover Raul's identity, thanks to Maria's sister. It is part of the trap, but Raul does not know it. Ramón and his henchmen go into the Raul's modest home. Once inside, Ramón explains how María died. He explains that they struggled – it was an accident, but now he needs to kill Raul in revenge. Ramón explained that he had to kill the pharmacist because she knew too much, and he killed Raul's neighbor in a case of mistaken identity. Police burst in. They have heard enough to be able to arrest Ramón and his gangster minions. All is resolved, except Ramón's María is still dead and not able to answer questions about just how Ramón deceived her. Raul's María, now with her "lucky 13" gold and diamond brooch, has some questions.



THEMES

Temptation: *El Medallón del crimen (El 13 de oro)* is a crime drama, but it is also a psychological investigation into temptation and why people fall into doing things they know will be self-destructive or which violate their core values. When Raul goes to the office, it's clear why he succumbs to the champagne toasts, even though he scarcely drinks alcohol. He wants to be accepted by his office mates and the group. Then, when he sees the mysterious woman who is wearing the brooch he designed for his beloved María, he is overwhelmed by emotion and when she shows affection to him, he goes along with it, even though he swears he would never betray his wife. The mysterious woman invites Raul to her apartment, even without knowing his name. She knows it is dangerous; her gangster boyfriend is a hot-tempered murderer who would not even give her his real name when they first met. But, her defiance trumps her common sense in another case of strong emotions flooding and negating reason and rationality.

Deception: María tries to deceive to deceive Ramón and it ultimately leads to her undoing. She should know that betrayal is the one thing he cannot abide; in fact, the film opens with a scene of his shooting a double-crossing underling three times in the head. The soundtrack, with the blaring jazz that evokes agitated emotions and the omnipresent pops and cracks of fireworks that sound all the world like gunshots, reinforces the presence of death by gunshot. María tries to deceive Ramón by trying to explain away the smell of cigar smoke and the cigar itself, and then ultimately, to claim her sister's friend visited. Nothing about her story is true. But, nothing about Ramón's story to her has been true: he lied about his name, his identity, and his intentions. The level of deception is what makes this film noir so intriguing: where does deception begin and end? In this

case, the deception is an attempt to invent oneself, but ultimately, the effort is futile because the only reality to build on is one of moral quicksand. Ramón is a gangster whose business is about fraud and false identities. María is a woman who will enter into a “kept woman” status in order to advance herself and her status in the world.

Doppelganger: This fascinating film is filled with doublings and ambiguity, all of which lead people down a path of self-destruction. In addition to having doubles, they are also coins with two sides, which is not to say there is a simple dialectic of good and evil, but of different choices. The two Marías share not only the same first name, but also the gift of the gold and diamond brooch with the number, 13. It might be easy to say that this is a Madonna / whore dialectic, with Raul's wife representing the virtuous, self-sacrificing legitimate wife and mother, while Ramón's girlfriend is a woman of loose morals. However, the two Marías have made different choices, both having to do with self-abnegation, which leads to the observation that in Juan Bustillo Oro's films, female self-abnegation or abjection is inescapable. The “wife” María is self-abnegating in sacrificing her dignity and common sense in supporting her husband, while the “moll” María has sacrificed her virtue and status in a highly Catholic Mexico in order to have material security. Other doublings (or false doublings) include the “R” tiepin and the fact that it could refer to several people with that first name.

Fate: The film itself is about the outcome of a twist of fate that brings two men from completely different worlds together, with fatal outcome. What brings them together is the gold “13” brooch, which functions almost as the ring in the classic Indian epic, *Ramayana*. In *Ramayana*, Prince Rama gives his wife his signet ring in order to prove his love for her, and so she will have a token of his love. There are many convolutions, but at the end, the ring is on the finger of its rightful owners, and in the end, the Gold 13 is on the bosom of the woman for whom it was intended. In fact, there is a moment in which the fact that the gold 13 is on the bosom of a kept woman whose motives are purely materialistic, makes it appear that the brooch has been somehow defiled. When the brooch returns to the virtuous María's chest, order is restored to the universe.

CHARACTERS

Raul González	Mild-mannered father and office worker at a real estate agency
María González	Married to Raul
María Álvarez	A gangster's kept woman
Ramón Torres	A gangster who also goes by Luis Jiménez, jealous and prone to kill
Carlitos	Young son of Raul and María

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Raul González: Raul is married to María, and they have a son, Carlitos. They lost a baby at one time, and it has stressed their marriage and their finances. Raul is a soft-spoken, gentle man who is easily swayed by his tender feelings.

Family Man: As a hero, Raul is a complex interrogation of Mexican values as they apply to men. On the one hand, he epitomizes all the core values that Mexican society values: he is a devoted family man, faithful to his virtuous wife, generous and loving to his son, and dedicated to working hard to support the family, who live in a clean, modest home. At work, he is known for his devotion to his family, and one of his priorities is to find the perfect New Year's gift for Carlitos and for María.

Macho - Toxic Masculinity: Raul is the anti-thesis of “macho,” which is exemplified by the gangster, Ramón Torres. Ramón Torres defends an exaggerated code of honor, pride, and respect, which he does in his day-to-day life as a cruel, sadistic gangster. Ramón verbally and physically abuses women, tortures and murders men who seem to be double-crossing him, kills anyone who might be inconvenient, and then uses force of will and connections to get his own way and enforce his particular vision of reality. Ramón is one of many of Juan Bustillo Oro's male

characters whose desire to be universally acknowledged for being tough, strong, and macho ultimately turns toxic. In Bustillo Oro's world, toxic masculinity is always self-destructive.

Idealistic: Raul is very idealistic, especially with respect to his family. He wants to earn as much money as possible to give to his wife, who runs the household affairs and raises their child, Carlitos. He wants to commemorate their wedding anniversary, June 13, by designing earrings and a brooch with the number 13 within a circle. His idealism sometimes makes him a bit of a bore to his officemates, who have heard the story of June 13 many times. The fact that he is so fixated on some of his favorite ideas or conceits makes him naïve and situationally unaware. It also makes him have a rather rose-colored notion of what it takes to clear his name from a murder he did not commit. When he brings the body of María Alvarez back to her apartment, he does not think about how many people may witness him, or how to account for her blood in his car and all over his coat.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. While the film seems to at first critique “weak” men, as it goes on, it is clearly a critique of masculinity, particularly the “macho” kind of hyper-masculinity. Please describe three passages in which Ramón, the gangster, demonstrates toxic masculinity.
2. Describe the instances in which there is doubling and ambiguity in the elements of the plot and the personae. They can include the names of the characters, their initials, and also the names of restaurants.
3. Describe how the gold brooch in the shape of the number 13 acts as a catalyst to the point it almost has magical qualities. How does it contrast with the “R” tie pin, in the kinds of actions it precipitates?
4. How are the restaurant, apartment building where the gangster's girlfriend lives, and the home of the González family all kinds of “Ratoneras” (rat-catchers or mouse traps)? Describe what happens in each, and their appearance.
5. Explain how the soundtrack, with the sounds of jazz, of dance music, of street sounds, of firecrackers, and of gunshots, serves to echo what is happening in the plot, and how the sounds either support or subvert interpretive possibilities.
6. What does the film suggest about the role of women in society? María González is a good wife; María Alvarez is a “bad woman” -- the kept woman of a gangster. However, neither one has true agency in the film, and each is abject in her own way. Propose an explanation of why that might be so.