

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## IN THE TIME OF DON PORFIRIO / En Tiempos De Don Porfirio (1934) Juan Bustillo Oro

Genre : Drama

Link: <https://youtu.be/Mj38OuEqrFY>

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

### OVERVIEW

If one thinks it is possible for a F. W. Murnau (*Nosferatu*), Fritz Lang (*M*, *Metropolis*), or a Juan Bustillo Oro (*Dos Monjes*), to turn on a dime and simply switch off their drive to innovate, to experiment with camera angles, with the goal of probing the deepest recesses of the human heart and spirit, where intersections of light, dark, happiness, and horror abound – well, one is going to be disappointed. There is absolutely no way that the early innovators of film, who went to extreme efforts to create chiaroscuro under primitive conditions, and to find dramatic camera angles, when to do so put life and limb in peril, would abandon their quest to find the limits of expressionism and to visually capture what literature had done for at least a hundred years, in Romanticism and the Gothic.

So, for that reason, it is probably foolish to take *En tiempos de Don Porfirio* (Dir. Juan Bustillo Oro, 1940) at face value, for what it purports to be, which is a nostalgic feelgood comedy (granted, technically it ends in a marriage or two, making it align with the technical definition of comedy), about lovely people having a lovely romance in lovely settings. But, if that's what you want to see, that is what you will see, so for Mexicans living out the worst economic times in their memory, with the promises of the Revolution thoroughly gutted by President Cardenas's nationalizations and restrictions, which effectively chased away foreign investment and resulted in the first wave of emigrants who left Mexico to seek jobs elsewhere.

And, on the surface, *En tiempos de Don Porfirio* does seem like good escapist fare, traveling back to the time of President Don Porfirio Diaz, who was president from 1876 – 1911. If you're thinking that sounds like a lot longer than the official "sexenio" (six-year term limit), you're right. Porfirio Diaz served 7 terms, most of which were tainted by probable irregularities, a fact that, combined with the staggering level of social inequality during Mexico's equivalent of the "Gilded Age," led to the Mexican Revolution, which effectively cut off his term in 1911. But, one does not see the inhumane working conditions of the workers and the vast numbers of poor. Instead, *En tiempos de Don Porfirio* gives us a glimpse of a glittering Belle Epoque, where fashions and architecture were imported directly from France and Spain. It's a bit like watching a performance from Versailles, knowing that Versailles was built from ravaged resources: human as well as mineral and agricultural.

Juan Bustillo Oro, whose work, *Dos Monjes* (1934) is a tour de force of expressionism, uses chiaroscuro, dramatic camera angles, and lighting to create juxtapositions that suggest that there is darkness and death at the edge of life (and privilege), and that there is moral decay in the heart of society's institutions such as marriage. Further, the singing and dancing numbers that are so ostensibly about courtship and romance, are in reality about trickery, scheming, and Machiavellianism. This is a world devoid of true heart or soul. The gilded cage is as good as it gets. At least the wrought iron bars are pretty.

### SYNOPSIS

The beautiful Carlota is left standing at the altar by her fiance, Don Francisco, who was in the middle of losing his fortune at the blackjack table to the scheming Don Rodrigo. Unbeknownst to the rest of the world, young Carlota is pregnant. Carlota's mother bars Don Francisco, and whisks her off to Paris, where

she has an arranged marriage for appearances with a friend of the family. Years later, Carlota's young daughter, Carmen, has grown up to be a beauty in her own right and they return to Mexico. In Mexico City, Don Francisco wants Carmen to marry Don Rodrigo to recoup his lost fortune. In the meantime, Carmen is repulsed by the old, fat, greedy Don Rodrigo, and has fallen in love with the handsome, young Fernando. Carlota clearly prefers Fernando, which ultimately results in a duel. At the duel, Carmen finds out that Don Francisco is her father, and Carlota discovers that Don Francisco did not jilt her at all but that Carlota's mother blocked him. Don Rodrigo is now exposed as a conniving card shark. Carlota and Francisco commit to marry, as do Carmen and Fernando. The story ends looking ahead to a double wedding.

## STORY

**The absent-minded gambler:** Don Francisco, generously called “bohemian,” but really no more than a compulsive gambler who gets away with it due to his position in society, has just lost everything he owns in a card game. The wealthy Don Rodrigo has won, potentially by cheating. Don Francisco, amiably referred to as “Don Pancho” by friends and family, is clearly the type of bad boy rascal that women love, but families hate, especially when they prefer the casino to the cathedral. Don Francisco (right) is gambling with Don Rodrigo (left) rather than going to the church where he is scheduled to marry his betrothed, Dona Carlota. Don Rodrigo, Don Francisco's wealthy friend, is magnanimous as he whisks away all of Don Francisco's earthly goods in their final round. At this point in time, Don Rodrigo looks like a complete lout and perhaps a professional card sharp. His attitude is callous and his eyes have a carnivorous gleam. As (bad) luck would have it, today is Don Francisco's wedding day. But, he has been too busy at the gaming table to pay much mind to that. He keeps on smoking cigars, drinking something that looks vile, and upping the ante. Little does he know his “good friend” will beat him out of everything he owns.



**Mother's interference:** "He will never darken this door again!" Don Francisco loves Carlota. But, Carlota's mother is outraged. She tells Carlota to forget him and she informs Don Francisco that he is not welcome, and in fact, if he ever dares to darken her doorstep, there will be consequences.



**Unmarried and pregnant:** Carlota does not realize that Don Francisco wants to marry her, but has been blocked by mother. Carlota believes she has been jilted. As such, the jilted bride, Carlota, is in a pickle. She is unmarried and pregnant at a time when to be unmarried and pregnant means you will be shunned permanently from society. Fleeing to anonymity. Fortunately, Carlota has family connections in Paris, and it is sufficiently distant from Mexico City to keep away prying eyes. Plus, it does have the special cachet of being "Paris" at the peak of the "Belle Epoque." Marrying an uncle. It's necessary, and we understand it's never consummated, but still the fact that Carlota marries her uncle in order for her daughter to be "legitimate" and to have an official father, is creepy. Our heart goes out to poor Carlota and the fact that she has essentially bid good-bye to marital bliss. She plunges herself into raising her daughter.

**Time for the daughter to marry:** The daughter of Dona Carlota and Don Francisco is a little angel. She has a natural sweetness and grows up to be quite accomplished as well as kind-hearted, thanks to the tender ministrations of her mother. Carlota's husband dies. Carlota is blossoming into a gorgeous and talented young woman. So, they make the decision to return to Mexico City, on the eve of President Don Porfirio's second term inauguration. Arriving at a moment of cultural and political euphoria bodes well for young Carlota. She is likely to find a good match for marriage.

**Father's plan for his daughter:** But, when Don Francisco (Carlota's biological father) gets wind of the fact his daughter is in town, and that she's a beauty, he wastes not a minute in cooking up a revenge fantasy. Unfortunately, it involves sacrificing his daughter, but never mind that. He wants her to marry Don Rodrigo, the cad who distracted Don Francisco at the card game and resulted in his losing his money and his time slot at the altar. Uh-oh.

**Carmen has fallen in love with Fernando.** Fernando prevails with his beautiful, honeyed voice. Carmen plays the piano and leaves her balcony doors open at night. Fernando stands in the courtyard, and as Carmen plays the song on the piano, he sings. It is a romantic song a zarzuela. In a scene reminiscent of Romeo and Juliet, Carmen steps onto the balcony to speak with Fernando. However, they cannot hear each other well, so Chloe, the maid, devises a communication device that consists of cans joined by a string. The device does not actually work, and they have to shout to each other. The shouting arouses Dona Carlota, the strict mother and duena, who inquires what is happening. Quick-witted Chloe improvises a pretext, and in the meantime the can clatters to the ground.



**Don Rodrigo courts Carmen:** Don Francisco is determined to get into Don Rodrigo's back pocket and right the long-ago and long-forgotten wrong by having him marry his still unacknowledged daughter. You'd never know they harbor such dark secrets. Don Rodrigo comes to the home of Dona Carlota to woo her daughter. He offers to sing as Carmen accompanies him. Sadly, he has a terrible voice, and his constant, jerky hand motions as his further curls his moustache (which looks like the horns from a longhorn) do not calm him. Instead, he is more nervous than ever



**The Dance:** Dona Carlota, Dona Carmen, Don Rodrigo, Don Francisco and Fernando are invited to a formal dance. While they dance the waltz, Dona Carlota comes to find out that Don Francisco did not willingly abandon her, but was separated by Carlota's mother, who moved the family to France without informing Don Francisco of her whereabouts. Dona Carmen admits she loves Fernando, but the wedding has been planned. Carmen will marry the horrible Don Rodrigo. Fernando intentionally gets Don Rodrigo drunk.



**Don Rodrigo challenges Fernando to a duel:** Don Rodrigo is outraged by Fernando's behavior. He must fight him in a duel. Don Rodrigo has no desire to participate in this foolish act. On the dueling field, Carmen learns that Don Francisco is her father. She also learns why he did not appear at his wedding and also why he was banished. Carmen and Fernando turn to each other, ecstatic. Don Rodrigo scurries off while no one is looking.

**Double wedding:** After all these years, all is forgiven and Don Francisco makes Dona Carlota an honest woman, and little Carmen a new kind of authentic legitimacy rather than the legal legitimacy of the marriage of convenience between Carlota and Tio (shudder). The story is technically a comedy in the Shakespearean sense because it ends up in a wedding. However, there is darkness underneath when one realizes the fundamental debasement of women. Even the lucky ones have to compromise their hearts in order to survive the world. Such a world gave rise to mothers counseling their daughters, "It's just as easy to fall in love with a wealthy person as a poor one." The movie ends with Don Francisco telling his bride that "My word is good. I have made an offer of marriage," and then, "The moment you think of marriage is the moment you die." What a happy ending.



## THEMES

**Nostalgia:** Beginning with the title of the film (*In the times of Porfirio Diaz*) and continuing with themes of love, separation, loss, and reconciliation, the script tells the story of a betrothed couple whose wedding was cancelled due to the failure of the bridegroom to appear, and an outraged mother who blocked her pregnant daughter's contact with her fiancé, so she could move to France, marry her uncle, and raise her daughter in tacit respectability. It is worth keeping in mind that the decadent behavior happened before Porfirio Diaz was elected to his first term, and all the restoration occurred while Porfirio Diaz was snugly ensconced in his second term, where he brought about a stunning pace of infrastructure and economic transformation. The fact that it mainly benefited the upper classes and exacerbated income inequality is not addressed in this film. After all, it is a story of individuals in the upper economic classes of Mexico. Thus, the glittering dances and beautiful homes were designed to evoke nostalgia among the upper and middle-class viewers who had endured 30 years of change and economic difficulties.

**Marriage and "death":** Don Francisco is introduced to us as a young man so addicted to gambling that he lost all his money at the very same night he was to be married. The memory of this is evoked at the end of the film, when "the minute you intend to marry is the first moment of your death." In the case of Don Francisco's loss of his worldly possessions to Don Rodrigo at the gaming table was certainly a kind of death to his lifestyle. At the end, in the more optimistic times of Don Porfirio, his lines are intended to

be taken as humorous (the “end” of the freedom of the bachelor lifestyle, one supposes). There are other scenes that bring the notion that marriage and death are closely intertwined, particularly as one considers the fate of Carmen, who has been engaged to old, foolish, but wealthy (partly due to the fact that he won Don Francisco’s money years ago) Don Rodrigo whom she loathes. The marriage would have been a “death” for her, but for the duel, which was supposed to mete out death to at least one of the duelists. Fortunately, Don Rodrigo fled, leaving Fernando and Carmen to marry.

**Arranged marriages vs. marrying for love:** It is not entirely clear if Carlota and Don Francisco were marrying for love at the beginning of the film, but one can assume that they were. After he loses all his property and leaves his bride standing at the altar, Carlota’s mother whisks her pregnant daughter to Paris where she is married in an arranged marriage. Later, Carlota decides that an arranged marriage is right for Carmen, particularly one that will in theory restore ill-gotten resources to the family purse. In the end, however, Carmen and Fernando marry for love, and they are ecstatic. Carlota and Don Francisco also marry at the end, as he claims to have loved her all these years, but she disappeared, thanks to the mother. Carlota has believed that Don Francisco abandoned her all these years. When she learns the truth, her feelings (in theory) are restored, but there is not much about her face or her demeanor to indicate that. Instead, she is again marrying for convenience – this time to make a nice connection to her daughter and the father of her daughter. It’s not exactly heart-warming.

**Outside versus inside / in the light or in the darkness?:** Bustillo Oro incorporates the expressionistic techniques he used in his earlier films, particularly in *Dos Monjes (1934)*, and focuses on dramatic lighting to suggest not only things about the subjects psychological state, but also their admittance into the world. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this is with Fernando. He is in the shadows as he serenades Carmen from the courtyard below her balcony. His being half in the shadows and half in the light suggests that his ontological state is one of transition and of “becoming” – he a provisional being, and until he is accepted into the family circle, he will be in the dark, on the outside, singing to get in. The same can be said for Don Rodrigo, but in reverse. He is brightly illuminated in the parlor as he sings to Carmen’s accompaniment. But, in the pre-dawn hours of the duel, the lighting puts him in the shadows. He continues to be in the shadows and hidden in the darkness to the point that he slips off into the dark altogether. His ontological state has taken him into the dark, into nothingness, and he is no longer a threat to the happiness of Carmen and Fernando.

**Women’s roles in society:** In this film, women have essentially two roles in society. In the pre-Porfiriato as indicated in the earlier moments in the film, women are wives and mothers. They marry for respectability and social standing. When they are mothers, they must be “Mother Hawks” – talons out, wings outstretched, ready to fly to protect their young, and to swoop in and attack with their claws and sharp beaks. Carlota’s mother stands, ramrod-straight, and tells the wastrel reprobate Don Francisco to put any idea out of his head that he might have had of ever marrying the young woman he jilted and abandoned at the altar. She is an iron mother hawk. Don’t cross her. The implication was that such extremes were necessary in the pre Porfirio Diaz days. When the family returns to Mexico, in the times of Porfirio Diaz, there are still strong, protective mothers. Young women can now marry for love, however, and they can be accomplished in their own right – playing the piano and singing. They can also marry later in life, and have the luxury of marrying a scapegrace wastrel, as long as he is a part of the right social class.

## CHARACTERS

Don Francisco	“Bohemian” member of a distinguished family
Don Rodrigo	Don Francisco’s wealthy friend
Doña Carlota	Engaged to marry Don Francisco
Doña Carmen	Daughter of Dona Carlota
Fernando Villanueva	Carmen’s suitor

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**DONA CARLOTA** When she is young and in love with the bohemian compulsive gambler yet charming wastrel, Don Francisco, Carlota is idealistic and malleable. However, being left at the altar by a fiancé she never hears from again, despite her being pregnant with his child, has a way of hardening the once-pliable heartstrings. Once in France, Carlota agrees to marry her uncle in order to maintain respectability. She then devotes her entire life to the future of her daughter, Carmen. She is a strict, but loving mother, and she expects obedience and filial piety from her daughter. That said, she is not above a bit of revenge fantasizing and desires Carmen to marry a wealthy man. Doña Carlota does not know that Don Francisco actually wanted to marry her, but that her own mother wanted to protect her from his dissolute ways. It is a bit surprising that she would have anything to do with him, but rationality is not what one looks for in a romantic comedy that trucks with nostalgia for a dictatorship.

*Determined* She's been dealt a rough hand, but she plays her cards as well as she can. She does not commit suicide when she's abandoned, nor does she go into hiding and then give her daughter up for adoption. She lifts her chin, goes to Paris, and commits herself to a positive life for her daughter.

*Optimistic:* The ordinary mortal would think there's nothing to be happy about when it comes to her life, but Carlota refuses to give up. She smiles through it all, and truly believes that she will eventually be able to bring the world back into balance, and they have a future in Mexico.

*Ambitious* She is very determined that Carmen have the best possible upbringing and she inculcates in her the best possible morals and religious upbringing. She wants Carmen to marry well.

*Generous* Carlota gives up her entire life in order to prepare for the birth of her baby. She is also generous and kind to her uncle, and treats his willingness to marry her with grace and kindness. She is also serious and severe, and expects obedience from Carmen.

*Forgiving* Carlota forgives Don Francisco for his horrendous betrayal, in part because she sees that he lost everything to Don Rodrigo and has suffered the consequences of his action, and also because she can blame Don Rodrigo. It helps that she never stopped loving the useless Don Francisco.

## QUESTIONS

1. This film, along with *Mexico de mis recuerdos (Mexico of my Memories)*, is classified as being part of a sub-genre, "longing for Porfirianism." The films inspired in the viewers a longing to return to a "gilded age" past, and what was perceived to have been a time of stunning growth and cultural achievement. What are elements in this film that romanticize that period in Mexican history?
2. How does *En tiempos de Don Porfirio* undermine the notion of arranged marriages? Where is the arranged marriage in this film, and what are its positive and negative aspects?
3. What kind of hero is Don Francisco? Or, on the other hand, is he not a hero at all, but a kind of shameless rogue? On the one hand, he seems admirable because he never wanted to abandon Carlota and never see her again, but on the other hand he did miss his own wedding. How does he reflect Mexican society during the time of Porfirio Diaz?
4. What is the role of music in *En tiempos de Don Porfirio*? Describe the music found in the film and explain its function in the narrative. How do the scenes with music advance the narrative and the action of the film? Include the act of accompanying as well.
5. What is the role of the matriarch in the film? How does Carlota's mother take a leadership role? What does she do? Then, after Carmen has turned 18, how does Carlota try to protect her?