

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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TWO MONKS / Dos Monjes (1934)

Juan Bustillo Oro

Genre : Horror

<https://youtu.be/UR1xkIKqHpg>

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

OVERVIEW

Expressionism: *Dos Monjes (Two Monks)* emerged in 1934 as one of the most innovative Expressionist films of the time. In the same genre as the work explored by the German Expressionist filmmakers, F. W. Murnau and Fritz Lang, Juan Bustillo Oro uses dramatic techniques to tell a story, but more importantly to probe the psychological state and the nature of reality of the protagonists.

Mexican Expressionism: *Dos Monjes (Two Monks)* is a ground-breaking film of Mexican Expressionism. Bustillo Oro's ability to manage the techniques and ideas of Expressionism is stunning, particularly considering he and his crew had to improvise and build for the first time the sets and the techniques in order to bring about the effects. Specifically, there is a visual "conversation" with various antecedents, which include the German Expressionist cinematographers: F. W. Murnau and Fritz Lang. From art, the conversations include the painters Edvard Munch, Ernst Kirchner, Pablo Picasso, and the sculptor, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska.

Government Policy: Although critically well received, it was followed by only one of the same Expressionist genre, primarily because the newly-elected president of Mexico, President Cardenas, gave financial support to work following Leninist notions that art was to be used for didactic purposes, and to inculcate socialist values. Thus, his presidency supported the films that were consonant with themes such as land reform, nationalization of national resources, separation of church and state, educational opportunities for indigenous, and more. Abstract, modernist, and expressionistic art forms clashed with his administration's ideology. So, Bustillo Oro, along with other filmmakers, began to make more traditional films, although there is no doubt that Bustillo Oro's aesthetic ideas infuse all his work, and even constitute a subversion of the dominant ideology of the day.

SYNOPSIS

The story is a basic one: The storyline of *Dos Monjes* is straight-forward, especially as Gothic fiction goes. Two monks, who clearly hate each other, are in the same monastery. One has a secret, and the other has a lacuna, a big gap in his memory, which is not as much like amnesia as something that might have had from a shock from which his mind has not yet recovered. A young woman is shot during an argument between two young men. What really happened? The only certain thing is that she is dead, and that the two men ended up at the same monastery. We learn what happened in the accident through flashbacks. The details of the accident are not as important as the psychological story being told by means of film technique, and also the destabilization of reality and all the ontological considerations attendant to it. Specifically, Bustillo Oro uses lighting, shadows, point of view and perspective to call into question what is real and what is a hallucination or flaw in memory.

Two mysterious monks are shuffling about in a shadowy Gothic monastery. They hate each other but no one knows why. Slowly, it is revealed that one of the monks, Javier, had a nervous breakdown. He, was a gifted but composer who fell in love with his beautiful neighbor, Anita. She, however, was in love with Javier's boyfriend, Juan, who has left to spend time at sea to earn money to marry. Anita feels sorry for Javier, who seems frail and about to die. Juan visits Ana to ask for a kiss for courage. Jaime sees them and assumes Juan is attacking her. Javier goes to Ana's defense and attacks Juan with his cane. Juan

defends himself with his gun, but unfortunately ends up shooting and killing Ana. Juan is overwhelmed by guilt; Javier and Juan join a monastery. Javier is rarely lucid. Juan is tormented by guilt. Juan continues telling the Prior the story, and Javier descends to into madness, goes to the monastery's organ, and plays the song he composed for Ana. A large group of monks slowly converge on the organ. Javier is playing as he is dying. He collapses and Juan rushes in to catch him. Juan asks for forgiveness, Javier forgives him, and then dies in Juan's arms.

STORY

MONASTRY *Dos Monjes* opens in the chapel of a massive and shadowy monastery illuminated in some parts, but cast in shadows in others. It sets the stage for what is to come – an expressionistic, shadowy vision of what may or may not be reality, particularly in this transitional world, positioned between the light, free outside world and the interior one of shadows, which hint at secrets, forbidden memories, and death. Monks in gray, shadowy robes and hoods shuffle in for what appears to be a religious service or other ritual. They are faceless and they do not speak to each other or gesture to each other in any way as they shuffle in. Are they alive? Are they spirits? Each begins to pound his chest in the same way – spare, unexpressive gestures that surely inflict self-harm. These are flagellant monks. Each monk begins to intone the same words: “En la casa de Dios, que salga el Demonio” (In the house of God, Leave, Demon! or, “Demon, get thee out of the House of God!”). The monks carry canisters of incense and they chant the same words many times. The incense burners (the thuribles) hang on chains. The monks swing the incense burners around. Welcome to the monastery. The dark shadows, strange illumination, and the robed monks give it the feeling of the undead.



JAVIER The prior is explaining that he worried about Javier, one of the monks. He asks one of the monks to fetch Javier from his cell. As he walks across the dark, shadowy open area and then to the small cell, a monk explains that Javier spends many hours at his desk, a candle for light, reading scriptures and saying prayers. Javier, wearing a gray robe, is seated at his table, reading and praying. Juan, in his black robe, approaches him. When Javier looks up, he gasps, "Juanito!" and lifts up a chair to hit him. Javier is clearly very ill. He has dark shadows under his eyes, and is quite agitated. He asks who the new monk is, although he knows quite well. Javier takes up a heavy crucifix and starts beating Juan. Bleeding, Juan is taken away. A song plays a sentimental tune, and Javier weeps in his cell. He has been sleeping on his hard, wooden bed, curled up and unable to move. The Prior of the monastery comes in and orders that his injuries (mainly to his face) be taken care of.



JAVIER'S CONFESSION Javier begins to explain to the Prior what is behind the behavior. Javier explains that Juan was the best friend he ever had in the world, but something terrible happened. Javier, in his agony in the monastery, confesses to a fellow monk that he does not know what happened but that something terrible is gnawing at his consciousness and grasp of reality. Observe the dark background and the light that illuminates only Javier and his confessor. Bustillo Oro's dramatic shot from above gives the audience the sense of being an omniscient observer.



ANA Javier is playing the piano, and he is wearing a light-colored suit. He is playing a song and singing. It is a sentimental song about love, and it is very soothing. Out the vast window, and across a small alley is another window, and behind the curtain, a lovely young woman is watching and smiling. After his mother tells him that he should express his feelings toward Ana, Javier takes out a beautiful, quill pen and writes the lyrics and the notation of his composition. He is interrupted by the sound of hoofbeats as a carriage makes its way to the houses. Through the transparent fabric, Javier sees the dark silhouettes of Ana, her mother, and the suitor and Ana's mother introduces her, Ana rejects the suitor's advances, and Ana's mother expresses displeasure. Ana is cast out of the house for having rejected the suitor. So, Javier's mother, Gertrudis, comes to the rescue and offers Ana a place to stay. "I love seeing the two of you work together! You make an enchanting couple!" she remarks enthusiastically.



JAVIER IS ILL Under a eucalyptus, Javier sinks down. He describes to Ana and to Juan how exhausted he is and admits the true extent of his illness (consumption). He does not expect to live through the winter and in fact "fears the winter" – and just begs to spend a single Spring with Ana. Javier has collapsed and the doctor is describing how dangerous his fever is. Juan suggests going to a new climate, but the doctor says there's no reason to do so – Javier could potentially have a future and children. Javier is much sicker than the doctor led him to believe.

JUAN RETURNS Juan, who is gone for long periods of time, is back from a sea voyage. He is visiting Javier, who has been his friend for many years. Javier, Juan, Ana, and Gertrudis spend many hours together singing, chatting, and enjoying each other's company. Javier, Juan, and Ana continue to spend time together, Javier with his composition and singing, Juan with his pipe and strategies for chess, and Ana with her books of poetry.

ANA IS SHOT Javier, wearing a light color cape and top hat, returns home after a walk at night. He sees Juan's cape and top hat on the table and wonders what is happening. In a repetition of the silhouette scene when Ana spurned her suitor, Javier sees Juan holding Ana. "Canalla! Scoundrel!" Javier assumes that Ana is the victim of sexual assault and he pulls out a cane to attack Juan. Juan pulls out a gun to defend himself. Ana leaps between them and is caught in the crossfire. Ana is dead. She is draped on the edge of a chaise longue. Javier shouts at Juan, "Asesino! Killer! Murderer!" It is at that moment that the song that Javier composed for Ana plays again.



JUAN'S CONFESSION We now see Juan in his cell speaking to the Prior, who is listening to Juan's confession. Juan tells what happened in the relationship, beginning with when he returned after a long sea voyage. He reveals that he and Ana were betrothed before he went on his long sea voyage. Unfortunately, when he returned from his sea voyage, he found that Ana had been thrown out of her house for rejecting the proposal of marriage from an eligible suitor. Juan is heartsick, but he does not want to disappoint Javier, who is frail and on the verge of collapse from consumption. In every scene in which Javier described the warm way in which Ana responded to him, Juan explains that Ana was just being "nice" – she had no intention of marrying Javier, or if she did have to marry him, it would be of convenience. Ana explains it would be a brief one, given Javier's physical condition. He is in love with Ana, but also loves Javier as a brother. His jealousy and inner conflict make him edgy and he tends to see things in exaggerated terms of good and evil, love and hate. On the fateful night in which Javier thought he saw Juan forcing himself on Ana, Juan explains that it was a terrible misunderstanding. He never intended to shoot Ana, and that he wanted to join a monastery in order to live a life of austerity and penance. Juan realizes that Ana is alone and he takes the opportunity to go to the home and tell her he will sacrifice himself and wait for their union, but that he needs an embrace and a kiss for courage. Just as he was making that declaration, which was, from his point of view, an honorable and sacrificial one, Javier bursts in and goes half-mad with rage and attacks Juan with his cane. Juan must fire in self-defense, accidentally killing Ana.

FORGIVENESS As the hallucinations subside, Juan rushes up. Juan asks for forgiveness, and he also forgives him for what happened. In the final scene, Javier dies as he approaches Juan, who has come to him to heal the rift between them and to forgive all possible misunderstandings. The lighting illuminates Javier's face, which is, for the first time, at peace. Absolved of guilt, but still mad, Javier sinks to be caught by Juan. And thus, Javier dies in Juan's arms. No one wins. The scene evokes visual allusions to German Romanticism and the Gothic – both in the depiction of the ineffable and unspeakable, as well as of the transition zone between life and death, and bringing into existence the notion of an undead – either as a vampire, or as one with one foot in the grave, as a consumptive (Javier).



THEMES

Madness: The primary theme of the film is that of madness and how it shapes one's perceptions of reality. In essence, it is about the victims of madness and how it takes their lives away from them. For Bustillo Oro, madness is depicted less in words and more in expressionistic images and lighting that show rather than describe the states of mind, the perceptions, and the unmoorings from rational thought.

Obsessive love: Javier's love for Ana verges on the obsessive. She does not reciprocate in the same way; she is mainly grateful to him and to Gertrudis (Javier's mother) for having given her a place to stay when her parents expelled her from their home after she rejected a suitor. Unbeknownst to all, Ana rejected the suitor because she had promised herself to Juan before his latest long sea voyage.

The nature of memory: Memory is not to be trusted in *Dos Monjes*. In fact, the film revolves around two competing narratives and ideas about how memory depends on the eye of the beholder, and that one's own memory may be inaccurate.

Friendship: The friendship shared by Juan and Javier is one that dates back to childhood. However, it does not withstand the pressure of rivalry over a love interest. Nor does it withstand the pressure of psychological instability.

Rivalry: Javier does not see Juan as a rival for Ana's love. Ana has told Juan that she has accepted Javier's marriage proposal out of gratitude. However, she does not expect it to be a long marriage, due to Javier's advancing consumption. Juan accepts that he will wait and marry Ana when she is a widow. In his last good-bye to her, Juan wants to embrace and kiss the love of his life. Ana resists, just as Javier enters and misinterprets the gesture, thinking that Juan is forcing himself on Ana. Tragedy ensues.

CHARACTERS

Javier	A gifted composer, but psychologically unstable
Juan	Javier's boyhood friend, now a sailor
Ana	Javier's next door neighbor with whom he falls in love
Gertrudis:	Javier's mother

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

JAVIER: Javier is the protagonist in *Dos Monjes*. He is a composer who lives next door to a lovely young woman, Ana, who is of marriageable age. Javier is a passionate composer of Romantic songs, who also suffers from consumption, making him often weak and light-headed. His mental state veers from joyous and exultant to paranoid and despairing, all of which are illustrated through Bustillo Oro's use of innovative film techniques.

Romantic: Javier's romanticism is illustrated by his occupation, which is that of a composer of romantic songs. The overall context of Romanticism is embodied by the focus on emotions and the expression of feelings and views about nature. Bustillo Oro emphasizes this aspect in scenes that place Javier with his piano in front of a vast window through which he can see Ana, and also the painted vase with flowers, and the sheets of staff paper strewn about it.

Idealistic: Javier believes in a better world and in the transformative powers of love. The only problem is that he has only the most tenuous of grasps on reality. Bustillo Oro's use of chiaroscuro and the repetition of the sweet, sentimental song that Javier composes for Ana are ways that show how Javier's idealism is actually the point of departure for his descent into madness.

Creative: Javier's creativity manifests first in his ability to compose romantic music that corresponds with the state of the human heart. Later, it flowers and manifests as the ability to bring music, passion, and art together in more intense Romantic compositions. Javier's gift is also his vulnerability, though, and when he is under psychological pressure, his music becomes discordant and chaotic, just as his heart is.

Self-Recriminating: Javier goes mad partially because he blames himself, but partially because he is haunted by the loss of his friendship with Juan and the love of Ana.

Jealous: Javier is a faithful friend to Juan and also a devoted and generous protector of Ana. However, he is jealous of Ana's attentions to Juan, and also of Juan's attentions to Ana. The jealousy intensifies, which Bustillo Oro exemplifies through the use of point of view shots, dramatic lighting, and the slow unraveling of the song.

QUESTIONS:

1. What is the function of flashbacks in *Dos Monjes*? How do they both affirm and call into question the veracity of the accounts?
2. When Javier describes what happens, he is wearing a light-colored suit and the camera angles tend to drift. When Juan is describing what happens, Javier is wearing a dark suit, and the camera angles are untilted, and there are numerous medium close-ups and two-shots. How does this difference demonstrate a divergent way of looking at the world?
3. Javier's face changes during the film. Please describe its variations and how it seems to indicate sickness, either mental or physical (consumptive).
4. In Gothic romanticism, doppelgangers abound. Consider the possibility that Javier and Juan have a doppelganger relationship. Is it possible that Juan is the doppelganger of Javier? Or, Javier is Juan's doppelganger? Explore both possibilities and then explain your position.
5. In Bustillo Oro's film, the cinematography is a character of its own. Describe the emotional impact on the viewer of the chiaroscuro, point of view shots, extreme camera angles, lighting, and moving dolly shots.