

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Susan Smith Nash, Ph.D.

## **THE TRACE OF SOME LIPS / La Huella De Unos Labios (1952)**

Juan Bustillo Oro

Genre : Drama

[https://youtu.be/M-TZy9Zr\\_T8](https://youtu.be/M-TZy9Zr_T8)

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### OVERVIEW

*La Huella de Unos Labios* (*The Trace of Some Lips, or Lip Prints*) is a film noir offering based on “Collared,” a short story first published in the magazine, *Black Mask Detective Stories*, by the author Cornell Woolrich. Woolrich, who was an extremely prolific author of “noir” novels, short stories, and film adaptations, differentiated himself from other writers of pulp fiction, detective novels, or “noir,” by avoiding the “hard-boiled detective” aspects and focusing more on the experience of the being and living in a twilight netherworld of dread, abuse, and above all, knowing a reality that the world at large neither sees nor accepts. Further, Woolrich’s protagonists are often the frail, vulnerable, and marginalized who are not likely to be believed in the first place. In *La Huella de unos labios*, the protagonist is a young woman who works in a cabaret, El Frenesí, as a cigarette vendor. Released in 1952, *La Huella de unos labios* (*The Trace of Some Lips*), incorporates many of the film techniques that Bustillo Oro used earlier in *Dos Monjes* (*Two Monks*), and in his other surrealist or expressionistic films. However, most of the film uses more traditional shots, such as close-ups, medium close-ups, and establishing shots, to allow the viewer to enter the world and the mind of María. In that world, the soft, yet intense feminine tones of voiceover open a portal into an intimate world of obsession, emptiness, and loss, and above all, a ravaging existential pain that triggers the need for revenge. With its “full circle” narrative structure, the film builds meaning with every repetition, and part of the satisfaction of the ultimate denouement is in the exposure of what is usually hidden, constituting a vindication of sorts for society’s weak, abused, and invisible. María assumes the role of detective, and also an active force as she plants evidence that will incriminate the murderer. This is not to say that the film is not without the female masochism that seems to characterize so many of Bustillo Oro’s films. María enters into a situation of deep degradation and physical risk in order to avenge her fiancé’s murder, a fact that is noted in the end.

### SYNOPSIS

María works as a cigarette girl at El Frenesí, a nightclub owned by a notorious mobster, César Villa. As she does her work, she has a number of admirers, including Manuel Andrade, a detective with the police force. When María quits her job to marry her fiancé, Felipe Rivas, César is outraged. He tries to kiss her, but she struggles and just as she is rebuffing him, a woman bursts through the door to accuse César of abuse. María escapes, but in the meantime, César sends people to threaten and intimidate Felipe. Suspicious and jealous, Felipe plans to assault César, which only triggers César’s murderous rage. In retaliation, César has Felipe run down by a truck. María sees the entire thing from her window and runs down just in time to hold him as he dies. César then proposes that María move in with him, and she accepts – not because she loves him, but because she despises him and wants to find a way to avenge Felipe’s death. Her patience pays off. One night, César asks her to lie about the time he arrived home from El Frenesí, and as he does so, he burns his shirt and acts in other suspicious ways. María discovers that he has murdered a paramour, and develops an elaborate trap so that he is discovered and punished for that, as well as for the murder of Felipe.

## STORY

*Maria is planning to marry to Felipe.* María was happy with her fiancé, Felipe, a young mechanic. Felipe has proposed to María, but she demurs. "I'm not worthy," she says. "My past..." Felipe protests and says that she is worthy of him – and in fact, he, too, has a past he is not too happy about. He explains that he has had a hard-knock life on the streets, and even in jail, but was able to raise himself out of it through hard work. She smiles and accepts the proposal.

*César's sadism:* César invites María for a drink. "I don't drink," she said. He then says he wants to know when and where she plans to be married, and wants to remain a friend. This is obviously a lie, because he then grabs her and aggressively embraces her and kisses her. She is saved from something worse when one of his lovers bursts in and starts screaming at him.



*Run down by a truck:* Luis Cortes runs down Felipe in the street just at a moment that Maria spotted him from her upstairs apartment. Felipe lies in the street, mortally injured. Maria runs down and embraces him as he dies. Luis, Cesar's sidekick, has just run over Felipe with a large truck, and has sped off without stopping. Felipe lies on the street, mortally injured. She knows who is responsible for the murder.



*Maria's revenge*      *The police can do nothing:* Manuel Andrade, the detective, explains that they can do nothing, and in fact, there are many such cases that they know of, but cannot prosecute for lack of evidence. Maria vows that she will avenge Felipe's death, and she is willing to go through any kind of pain, deprivation, or humiliation to do so. Manuel Andrade warns her against it. "It's too dangerous, and why degrade yourself?" She does it anyway. Cesar invites Maria to his office. He gives her a gift, and then when she recoils, he smiles and explains that the fact that she finds him repugnant is what most fascinates and excites him. He wants her, especially if she does not want him. Maria starts to regret her plan to be Cesar's girlfriend, and "human bait" to trap him in some sort of crime. She wants to be close so that if he commits other capital offenses she can turn him in. To do so, she becomes a detective of sorts. But, there is a price to pay. Cesar is verbally and physically abusive. Maria is physically revolted by Cesar's advances. He, however, is aroused by her revulsion. She understands that this is a psychologically unhealthy dynamic, but is willing to degrade herself in order to avenge Felipe's death. Maria is going through a state of intense, obsessive need for revenge, and the humiliating and degrading experience of being with a man she hates, just in order to catch him in something in order to avenge the death of her fiancé.



*Maria catches Cesar* The man enters, and she comments that he is usually cold and indifferent, but tonight he is different. He is tense and agitated. He tells her that if anyone asks, to say he was in before 3:00 am. If she does not, she will wish she had never been born. The man is César Villa, the owner of a nightclub and a confirmed womanizer, gambler, involved in organized crime. She mentions that he has lipstick on his collar, and he immediately goes into a panic. He takes off his shirt, then burns it before disposing of it. Maria asks why he's so upset about lipstick. She overhears Cesar talking to Luis to clean up the apartment and to plant a gun with another person's fingerprints. As Cesar sleeps, she finds a clean shirt, and then takes his keys from his pants pocket. Miraculously, she overhears that the apartment was in the same building as Luis Cortez's apartment, so she knows where it is.



*Planting evidence:* In the apartment, Maria finds a dead woman. She goes to the bathroom for lipstick, puts it on the dead woman's lips, and then smears it on the shirt. She then finds a newspaper with an ad for just that shirt. She opens it to the ad and then puts it in the dead woman's hand to point to where one might find the incriminating clue. She then slips out, but not before seeing Luis putting a gun in a little hiding place. She slips out, finds the gun, rubs off all the fingerprints, and then replaces it.



*Cesar and Luis are killed while running:* After going through the laundry, Cesar shouts to Maria to pack a suitcase. She does so, and to help her, Luis opens her closet. He pulls a gun and they leave. *The police arrive:* The police are waiting outside across the street, ready to arrest Cesar. Cesar pulls a gun and threatens to shoot Maria. At that point, Luis sees a truck – the same kind he used to run down Felipe. He drops his bags and makes a break for the truck. Maria wriggles free and starts to run across the street. Enraged, Cesar follows her. However, his timing is off, and Luis can't stop the truck. It runs over Cesar and kills him. Poetic justice has been served. Cesar has been killed in exactly the same way that he had Felipe killed. Luis dies as the truck plows into a building. She explains that she is not happy, and that nothing in the world will bring back Felipe, or, and this is even more profound – fill the void, the deep emptiness that she feels inside.



## THEMES

**Love:** The love that María has experienced with Felipe is one that has made her whole, and has healed the existential shame she feels for having been a “bad” woman in a society that is very polarizing and rigid when it comes to women’s status. When Luis sarcastically comments that Felipe is lucky to have such a loyal, virtuous, wholesome wife, he is impugning her character and suggesting that she has been a “loose” woman (or worse). Maria has internalized that belief, and for that reason, she thinks she is not worth of marriage. When Felipe accepts her unconditionally, and also describes his own checkered past, she is made whole, and at that moment, love becomes the one thing that can heal her sense of self-loathing. When he is killed and she avenges his death, it is not only to exact justice, but to respond to the cruelty that took away her human dignity.

**Revenge:** Maria pursues Cesar with a single-minded intensity that has but one goal: catch him in a crime and make him pay for it. She realizes that it was impossible to prove that Cesar had anything to do with Felipe’s murder, and yet she does not want Cesar to get away with it. So, her primary goal is not only to make him pay for his crime, but also to make him aware that he has not gotten away with it. To do so, Maria assumes a detective role, and closely analyzes the elements that would make it possible to expose Cesar’s crimes, and then to set up evidence that would convict him.

**Violence:** The atmosphere of the film is seething with violence that lurks just under the surface. Perhaps the most palpable is the violence (and violation) of and toward women. The more a woman detests Cesar, the more he wants to take her, ravish her, own her, and abuse her. This is remarkably sadistic and psychopathic, even in film noir, and it is very disturbing. The violence

begets more violence: after Cesar has Felipe roughed up, Felipe then approaches Cesar and punches him in the face. Cesar then escalates the violence by having Felipe killed. There is a clear cycle of ever-escalating levels of violence, and they tie directly to the concept of “honor.” While this film is not specifically about Mexico or Mexican culture, the presence of the honor code and honor culture align with Mexican heritage.

**Domestic Abuse:** María is abused in so many ways that it’s hard to understand why she endured it, until one comprehends that her entire goal is to avenge the death of Felipe. Cesar regularly pushes, hits, slaps, and threatens María. He also verbally abuses her by shouting at her, demanding impossible tasks to be done instantly, and mocking and degrading her. In a subversive reading of this text, one could argue that although Maria takes on the role of detective and warrior, she is also reinforcing the notion that for a woman to be truly virtuous in society, she must punish herself and deprive herself of basic comforts, dignity, and respect. The rather coded message is that there is no real place for a childless adult woman. It is a nihilistic view of society, and one can extend the exterminating energy toward Felipe, who defended the women. Ironically, the least abusive relationship is that between Cesar and his right-hand man, Luís. They have a strong bond, and Luis is very protective of his boss, while Cesar in turn, depends on him. They are the “power couple” in the movie, and the fact that they die at the same time, and in an accidental murder/suicide rather perversely echoes *Romeo and Juliet*.

**Hostile workplace.** This is the story of María, who will stop at nothing, including degrading herself, in order to avenge the death of her fiancé, Felipe, who was run down by a truck the day before he was to marry María and a day after he punched the face of the crime boss who was trying to seduce María. The structure of the story is of a full circle, beginning “in medias res” María’s goal to catch the murderer in another, prosecutable crime, seems to be within reach. As the new crime unfolds, Regularly subjected to the unwanted advances of the Mafioso boss, César Villa, she is routinely humiliated by him and his right-hand man, Luis Cortés. When she announces she is quitting to marry her fiancé, a mechanic by the name of Felipe Rivas, César responds with a humiliating sexual advance and by having Felipe physically attacked.

## CHARACTERS

María	Young, extremely beautiful cigarette girl at a cabaret, El Frenesí
César Villa	Owner of El Frenesí; sadistic, involved in organized crime
Felipe Rivas	María’s fiancé: a young, hard-working mechanic
Manuel Andrade	Detective on the police force, investigating Villa’s many crimes
Luís Cortés	Villa’s right-hand man and “fixer”

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**María:** Maria is a young, extremely pretty woman who works as a cigarette girl at the cabaret, El Frenesí (The Frenzy). She spurns the advances of the owner of the club, Cesar Villa, much to his displeasure, except that her rejection triggers his obsessive and narcissistic fixation on her. He wants to dominate, own, and control her. After he is responsible for the death of her fiancé, Felipe, she wants to turn his own negative qualities in on himself so that he will slip up and reveal himself when he inevitably commits another capital crime such as rape, murder, or both.

**Obsessive:** María is obsessive to an extreme degree. Her single-mindedness makes her hypervigilant and aware of any deviations from normal patterns. For example, when Cesar returned from the cabaret at 5 am in the morning, in a state of agitation, with lipstick on his collar, Maria knew something serious had happened. She was obsessed with finding out why.

**Shame:** Part of what drives María is a sense of shame that has been imposed on her by society. She works as a cigarette girl at a local nightclub but the implication is that she may have been considered “loose” or worse. The reality is that she is not respected, and her outfit for work shows that she is used and employed for her sexuality, and for that reason is simultaneously

desired and despised. It is not surprising that she has internalized the shame, to the point that she does not believe herself worthy of love. At the end of the film, there may be a hint of redemption because, thanks to her sacrifice and self-abasement, she has triggered a series of events that resulted in the evil hitman Luis running over his own object of devotion, the Mafiosi boss, Cesar Villa.

*Analytical:* Maria's attention to detail reminds one of the detectives in Edgar Allan Poe. Her methodical observation and ability to detect patterns and deviations from those patterns is reminiscent of the young heroines in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Victorian-age sensationalist novels, *Lady Audley's Secret*, *Thou Art the Man*, and more. It also reminds one of the sensation novels of Wilkie Collins such as *Armada*, and *Lady in White*, but without being so long or meandering. María shows great discipline and creativity as she develops a plan to plant evidence in the "cleaned" room in order to frame him and not allow him to escape justice yet again.

#### QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. When María loses Felipe, his death constitutes a rupture of her recovering sense of identity and legitimized role in society where she is a wife and potentially a mother, rather than a sexualized cigarette girl at a cabaret, whose role is to provide a kind of commodified visual stimulation and polite badinage. When he dies, she loses status in society, and has no way to regain it. But, are there ways for her to improve her social standing? Describe César Villa's designs for her, and how they might affect her status as a woman in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Mexico.
2. The movie is designed to have a populist appeal and to champion the underdogs – Felipe / María – who have prevailed in spite of challenging circumstances. Describe how César, while being in the mafia, could also represent the old guard of the Mexican government. Detail two or three aspects of César's role and behavior that could parallel the behavior of corrupt government officials.
3. In order to achieve her goal of making sure that César pays for his crimes, María becomes an astute observer of behavior. Describe the ways in which María was able to determine that Cesar had committed a crime, and also how she was able to block the plan to falsely implicate the innocent Francisco Rojas. Finally, describe how and why the actions she took at the dead woman's apartment would help bring justice and demonstrate Cesar's guilt.
4. The "trace of some lips" could be considered an extended metaphor the cry of resistance – the way to make what is often invisible (sexual assault, etc.) visible. Are there other potential metaphors in the film? Find one or two and discuss them.
5. Please explain how the faked evidence differs from each other. For example, when Luis Cortez places a gun with another person's fingerprints in an attempt to implicate that person in the murder, what is the ultimate intent? When Maria creates fake evidence and plants it, how does that actually recreate the truth behind the action, and restore what had been lost? What are some of the ethical and moral positions being promoted in the film? In this sense, can "noir" be seen as more normative than subversive? How?