

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **FOR THE LADIES, ALTHOUGH THEY PAY DEARLY** **Por Ellas Aunque Mal Paguen (1952)**

Juan Bustillo Oro

Genre : Comedy

Link: <https://youtu.be/UN7OzX6mqdY>

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

### OVERVIEW

Juan Bustillo Oro makes a significant shift in his screen-writing and directing in *Por ellas aunque mal paguen* (*For the women, although they pay badly*) by developing a musical romantic comedy which featured the extremely popular singer, Pedro Infante, along with his brother, the actor and singer, Angel Infante. The film builds on the populist spirit of the time which was highly critical of the elites of Mexico City, which were often portrayed in Bustillo Oro's films as useless parasites or worst, corrupt and in cahoots with criminals. This film is important in a number of ways, First, it is a showcase for the singing talents of both Pedro and Angel Infante, and Bustillo Oro's film techniques capture and convey the intense charismatic presence of Pedro Infante. Second, it celebrates life and traditions of the Mexican hacienda where the core values of hard work, fiscal prudence, and conservative gender roles were considered to be the bedrock of the Mexican spirit and a counterbalance to the superficiality, materialism, and falseness of the urban elites. Nowhere to be seen here is the nostalgia for the times of Porfirio Díaz and industrialization. Instead, the values of agrarian life are celebrated, along with strict hierarchies and gender roles. Another element that distinguishes this film from others of Bustillo Oro is the presence of the "charro," the highly revered singer of a Mariachi band. Mariachi music, which emerged in the state of Jalisco, in theory in the town of Cocula, southwest of Guadalajara, is considered, along with the costumes, dances, and decorations, to be at the heart of Mexican identity. While Bustillo Oro's earlier films examined identity from a Gothic sensibility (ontological insecurity) or in a historical sense (industrialism as national pride and progress, despite the widening social inequality), in *Por ellas aunque paguen mal*, the core values of the Mexican hacienda and those embodied in the mariachi music and the Mexican cowboy-derived charro tradition are presented as strengthening to the national fabric because it unifies and suggests pride, connectivity, and inclusivity in ways that were not possible before. The film is a joyful "fish out of water" story and romantic musical comedy, populist in sentiment (lampoons the elite) and a showcase for Sinaloa-born singer Pedro Infante and his brother Angel, also an actor and a singer. Juan Bustillo Oro wrote the script and directed the movie, which contains the themes that made his films appeal to a wide public: putting the elite in their place, the ultimate victory of decency and loyalty, answering the essential questions, "Who am I? What are my core beliefs?," a celebration of Mexican identity and culture, and finally, superiority of story-telling through film vs other methods of presenting reality. The story becomes about love, the power of music to cast a spell of love and fascination, and the grounding, humanizing value of traditional Mexican culture.

### SYNOPSIS

*Por ellas, aunque mal paguen* is the story of once-prominent family in Mexico's elite class who have fallen on hard times, primarily because of their extremely profligate ways. Don Anastacio, the father and head of household, has a plan. If he can keep up appearances, he will marry the daughters to rich husbands. Unfortunately, Don Anastacio's plans have gone awry, as he discovers that his gold-digging daughters have bagged gold-digging suitors, who believed

appearances (“We are ‘optical millionaires’” said Don Anastacio), just as their creditors have started to repossess their belongings. Just in the nick of time, Juan Manuel Campos, a wealthy ranch owner, has fallen hopelessly in love with Isabel, the older daughter, and they marry. However, he does not approve of the shameless profligacy of the entire family and decides to play a little trick on them. He moves to the ranch, where he confesses that he’s not wealthy at all, and the entire family will have to become ranch hands and work off his debt. This is a shock for the proud family. However, they do adapt, and even thrive as they transform from idle rich to the honest ranch workers, thanks to values, hard work, and the delicious food of the Mexican hacienda. Isabel, who was first disgusted by the idea that Juan Manuel is a ranch foreman and not the owner, begins to truly fall in love. Juan Manuel reveals that he is, in reality, the owner of the hacienda, and the entire family has a joyful and secure future.

## STORY

*Rich Family becomes poor* The film opens with a narrator’s voice-over. He takes the audience on a tour of the mansion (rented) where two sisters, Isabel and Mariana, are living. In their bedrooms, we see two gorgeous wedding dresses with extravagant trains and veils. On a chest of drawers is a frame with the photographs of two sisters. We are joining them as they prepare for their double wedding. Entering their elegant (but rented) mansion: The front door opens and two sisters enter. They are slender, dressed in elegant dresses and wearing high heels. One is a brunette, the other is blonde. They complain to each other that it was quite hot outside, and that shopping for the wedding was exhausting. They also lament that their failure to pay bills is crimping their style: soon the electricity will be cut off, along with other inconveniences. But, at least they are marrying rich men, they say. Soon their problems will be over. The patriarch of the family, along with his wife, Doña Victoria, enter the room. Don Anastacio is elegantly attired in a formal, extremely well-pressed, three-piece suit. He holds a cigar in his hand and explains what is happening in a florid, hyperbolic manner that comes across as bombastic blather. He is a tremendous snob, and is bemoaning the fact that they are about to lose their way of life in a permanent manner. The weddings are off! he says. The husbands-to-be turned out to be grifters themselves, and not wealthy at all. Worse, the electricity will be turned off. They have very little time to execute the plan, he says. Their last chance is to attend a party where there will be a number of eligible (read “rich”) bachelors. As Isabel and Mariana change gears and don gorgeous evening dresses, the door opens and the fashion designer who has designed and sold the elegant evening frocks comes in, flanked by two police officers. “We are repossessing the evening gowns!” she says. “Off, off! These dresses are coming with me!” So, Isabel and Mariana hand over the elegant dresses. But, what to wear to the party? “How about dressing in traditional Mexican dress? China poblana?” asks Don Anastacio. Recent nationalism and nativism has made the garb newly popular. So, they oblige, and in fact, look quite pretty in their elaborately embroidered dresses.

*The wedding:* The party takes place in a vast, open patio / ballroom in an elegant part of Mexico City. Their lovely outfits have caught the eye of one of the guests of honor (who is also a singer). Jose Manuel Campos is a wealthy land owner and rancher, who is also a famous singer. He approves of traditional Mexican finery; in fact, he prefers it. So, the strategy has worked, at least so far. Jose Manuel Campos sings songs with a friend, who jokes with him in a sort of improvised comedy routine for the audience. He is introduced and he starts to speak with Isabel. Isabel compliments Jose Manuel on his singing. He thanks her and she points out that she should be careful because there is one song in his repertoire which causes the listener to become hopelessly in love with him. Later, in her bedroom, as she prepares to blow out the candles, Isabel hears mariachi music. It is Jose Manuel, who has come to serenade her. It is a brief courtship, and the next thing we see is Isabel and Jose Manuel, kneeling in the church in a marriage ceremony. They decide to take their honeymoon in Mexico. After Isabel and Jose Manuel return from their honeymoon, the entire family goes on a tremendous spending spree, with furs, luxury cars, expensive jewels, tailor-made clothes, expensive liquors and more. Jose Manuel receives a call from his banker and he is astonished at the rate at which Isabel is spending money.



*Back at the Ranch:* Jose Manuel puts his foot down. He returns the jewels and shuts down the different department store credit accounts. They are not happy, but must accommodate the situation. It is clear that none of the family has even the least ability to generate their own revenue except through trying to impress the weak-minded that they are extremely important. Jose Manuel announces that he is returning to the ranch and that Isabel should go with him. She refuses. He goes anyway. Jose Manuel is very depressed and goes into a downward spiral, drinking too much at the local cantina, and filling his days morose thoughts about Isabel and his loss. One day, while being chided by Don Lupe, the ranch manager, he receives a telegram. It is from Isabel and it announces that the family is on its way to the ranch. Cut off from all accounts in the city, and left with no options, Don Anastacio, Doña Victoria, Isabel, Mariana, and César travel from Mexico City to the ranch in Jalisco. As Jose Manuel contemplates their arrival, he comes up with a scheme to put them in their place. The family arrives, but only after a long walk on foot as their car breaks down on the worst possible road. They end up at the ranch, tired, hungry, and ready for their evening ablutions (baths, pampering, etc.). They are in for a rude awakening. Don Lupe explains that he's the real owner and if they complain about their work requirements, and they decide to leave, they will leave with nothing – not even the clothes on their backs – because he paid for everything and thus he owns everything. The family suddenly is thrust into daily manual labor, doing the lowliest of tasks because it's the only kind of work that they have the skills for, and they are even rather incompetent at that. Doña Victoria prepares tortillas by hand and also different types of sauces and meat dishes.



*Confession, Contrition, Commitment - I'll Always Be By Your Side:* Jose Manuel tells Pedro that is about to leave, when Isabel approaches him. Pedro goes back to the bar to order more tequila, and Isabel says that if he goes, he will not go alone because she will go with him. She begs his forgiveness, and maintains she is not worthy. She then confesses to him that she is actually the one who is pregnant and that they are expecting a baby. Needless to say, all is forgiven and Jose Manuel embraces her fervently. His brother, who has just ordered a round of tequila shots, will have to drink them by himself. When Isabel informs José Manuel that the booty she was knitting was really for their baby, José Manuel is overjoyed, This scene illustrates the idea that true love is a union of two people, and that together, they forge a unified identify. Don Lupe, who sees the rapturous embrace of Isabel and Jose Manuel, is beside himself with joy. He runs about to tell everyone he can that everything is wonderful now – the two are now reconciled. He refers to Jose Manuel as “Patron,” which profoundly confuses Don Anastacio. When he learns the truth, he is thrilled, and, despite his saying he hated mariachi music, he lets out a loud, extended “grito” – (Mexican shout, followed by laughter that sounds like sobbing), and expresses his profound joy. Don Anastacio, now wearing an adorned round sombrero, a “charro” traje (embroided and adorned in silver) jacket, belt, and pants, is in his element.



## THEMES

**Mexican Identity:** Above all, the film celebrates what it means to be Mexican, and the unique traditions centered in the state of Jalisco, which was on the Camino Real from Mexico City to the western Pacific coast port city of San Blas. The Mexican cowboy and the adorned “charro” later incorporated into the uniforms worn by mariachi bands, are celebrated in the film, and shown to be both restorative and transformational for all Mexicans who have lost their bearings. When Don Anastacio complains about the mariachis and expresses horror at having to listen to it, his dislike shows his misguided disdain for Mexican tradition, and his preference for effete and even damaging colonialist fantasies, demonstrate that he is out of balance. At the end, as he performs the perfect Mexican mariachi “grito,” he has embraced all that is celebratory and life-engendering about Mexican culture. That said, the constant ingesting of tequila is perceived as repugnant by Isabel and her mother.

**Populism:** The film embraces Mexican roots and traditions and rejects elitism and vestiges of Spanish colonialist cultural domination. When Isabel and Mariana don the traditional “china poblana” dresses, they are the only things that are effective in gaining them husbands. The fact that Isabel’s smells of mothballs is a wonderful way to metaphorically suggest that she is finally taking her values out of the cedar chest where they have been locked away for far too long.

**Mocking the values of the “Idle Rich:”** When Don Anastacio rattles off his given names and his “honorifics,” Jose Manuel Campos responds with a long improvised list of names and “honorifics” of his own – but they are absurd, which instantly mocks Don Anastacio. Likewise, when he criticizes an employee for having his bathwater 2 or 3 degrees to cool, and he is extremely finicky about his mixed drinks, it is done in a way that is rather campy. Bustillo Oro mocks the values and traditions of the “idle rich.”

**True Love:** The film celebrates true love in contrast with a feigned love, expressed only to entrap someone into a materially advantageous union. Jose Manuel is a romantic, and he desires true love above all, to the point that he is willing to sing his “love philtre” (love potion) song to bewitch and spellbind Isabel (under the assumption that being spellbound is actually a condition of true love, or that it at least brings it about). Isabel is also a romantic; her ideas about true love have more to do with having a husband as a part of a beautiful, loving family, with a tiny new baby to love and to knit booties for.

**Trickery:** What makes the film a comedy and fun to watch is the “fish out of water” and “just desserts” interplay. Seeing the snobby elites taken down a notch and cut down to size is amusing and also to see them having to actually work for their keep is equally amusing. When César attempts to carry a large bag of feed, and in doing so loses his balance and falls over, it is quite comical. Perhaps the most amusing is seeing Doña Victoria in the kitchen, checking the spices in her sauces and hand flattening tortillas to make fresh every morning. Perfectly coiffed in Mexico City, she looks a bit harried here, with her hair falling over her face; not slatternly, but certainly mussed.

**The “Charro” and the Mariachi musical tradition:** A number of the songs sung by Pedro and Angel Infante are from the Mariachi tradition, which is quite appropriate for this film, not only because much takes place in a hacienda in Jalisco, but also because the original occasions for singing mariachi music was for weddings. The “charro” suit is worn by both Jose Manuel Campos and Pedro Infante, and it is showy and a point of national cultural pride.

## CHARACTERS

Don Anastacio	The patriarch of an aristocratic, proud family, now flat broke
Juan Manuel Campos	The idealistic wealthy owner of a hacienda several other properties
Pedro Infante	Extremely popular “charro” singer, brother of Juan Manuel Campos
Isabel	Older daughter of Don Anastacio, groomed to seek a wealthy husband
Mariana	Younger daughter, and programmed to focus on landing a wealthy fiance
Doña Victoria	Wife of Don Anastacio – extremely vain and materialistic
César	Brother of Isabel, materialistic and devoid of any skills except spending
Don Lupe	Ranch boss who agrees to pretend to be the real owner of the ranch

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Don Anastacio:** Representative of a colonial legacy of fetishization of titles, names, and “honorifics” of the Spanish casta, or upper class elites who dominated the culture for centuries. The Revolution as well as land reform did much to change the power balance, thus leaving types like Don Anastacio as almost caricatures of the past.

*Loquacious:* When Don Anastacio describes something, he inevitably does so with too many words, and too much embellishment. His use of ornate, often archaic (or even invented) words is

quite comical. The fact that he starts to use local terms such as “tarugo” (blockhead) and to say “qué caray” (good grief!) instead of extremely formal latinized terms is comical in itself. He represents self-invention; both in a sartorial sense as well as with semiotics / discourse.

*Snobbish:* Don Anastacio is quite aware of his family tree, and he'd like to think that everyone is equally impressed by it. Clearly, as in the case of Jane Austen's family in *Persuasion*, being obsessed with one's family tree and position due to one's birth and supposed “breeding.” The fact that he is resoundingly mocked for his attitudes bothers him not at all. He chalks it up to their lack of understanding and values.

*Good-natured:* The fact that he is ultimately optimistic and good-natured allows Don Anastacio to adjust to his new surroundings and to actually embrace the new roles and costumings. For Don Anastacio, the “suit makes the man” in a very literal sense and his identity rests in his costumings. The more ornate the plumage, the happier he is, regardless of its type. It just needs to be theatrical, and he is happy.

**José Manuel Campos:** José Manuel Campos is the counterpart to the urban, urbane Don Anastacio. Rooted in a long and proud tradition of owning land and breeding cattle and horses through responsible animal husbandry, Jose Manuel's mindset is traditional, conservative, and grounded in delayed gratification.

*Idealistic:* When José Manuel goes to Mexico City and sees Isabel in her lovely traditional dress and her graceful movements and lovely smile, he is captivated, primarily because her appearance conforms with his idealistic notion of a family and the role of a wife, mother, and companion.

*Traditional:* His values are traditional, which is to say that he believes in strict gender roles, as well as hierarchical social arrangements. He is the owner, the top boss, the “patron” of his ranch, and everyone must accede to that, even to the point of kissing his hand.

*Dionysian:* The fiesta, with mariachi music, tequila, and folkloric dances, are wildly Dionysian in the sense that they use inebriation to celebrate life, connectedness, and community. Jose Manuel's use of tequila certainly seems to fit this pattern, which is to say that he drinks to attain an altered state of consciousness and to feel as though he has somehow been able to express himself without barriers and in a truthful way; likewise, tequila seems to be a way of drowning sorrows as one contemplates either literal or figurative death (death of a dream or a love object).

## QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. In what way does the comedy in *Por Ellas Aunque Mal Paguen* touch on serious social issues in Mexico, such as the changing social order, and views about the role of women? Within the aristocratic notions of society of Doña Victoria, what is the proper role for women? For José Manuel, what is the correct role for a woman? How does the film show that traditional Mexican values are more satisfying for women than the life of an urban socialite? How does Isabel respond when she knows she is expecting a baby?
2. How do juxtapositions of city life and rural life lead to comedic situations in “Por Ellas ...”? Select two scenes that show that each of the family members (Don Anastacio, Doña Victoria, César, Isabel, and Mariana) are each completely unprepared for the life in a working ranch, or hacienda.
3. The songs sung by Jose Manuel Campos are alternately romantic, playful, and nostalgic. Please describe one of the songs. What is its core message? How does it relate to the plot of the movie, and how does it advance the action?

4. For most of the film, Isabel either proactively executes the “plan” that her father concocted to snag a rich husband, or she passively-aggressively resists. On the one hand, it could be seen as a difference between looking at Jose Manuel as a material object, useful only for her own gain, or looking at him as a human being capable of a connection that could potentially result in a merging and blending of identities in a true union. Describe some of the scenes that illustrate these processes.

5. Describe the differences between urban interiors and the ranch interiors. How do people position themselves in relation to each other in the Mexico City home and rooms? How do they do so in ranch in Mexico. What does it say about relationships? About the differences in worldviews and intimacy? Describe the lighting during the serenades and show how they create a world that illuminates waking dreams and idealized potential for the future.