

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE DARK ANGEL / El Angel Negro (1942)

Juan Bustillo Oro (Mexico)

Gender : Drama / Horror
<https://youtu.be/C4EI7zQZ5Lw>

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

OVERVIEW

In *El Angel Negro* (The Black Angel), Juan Bustillo Oro takes his desire to experiment with lighting, shot sequencing, mise-en-scene, and camera angles in order to achieve expressionistic effects that represent hidden, chthonic places in the mind and the heart, and a psychological experience that explores perception and beingness, and asks what happens when you represent ontological uncertainty.

In his earlier films, *Dos Monjes* (*Two Monks*) and *Cada loco son su tema* (*Every Madman with His Theme*), Bustillo Oro explores the deterioration of mental state due to guilt (*Dos Monjes*) and due to an excessive exposure to hyperbolic, sensational narrative, similar to the notion that young women could be negatively influenced by reading gothic novels or romances (*Cada loco con su tema*). In those cases, the audience's gaze was directed to a particular character whose mental stability was the primary focus. However, in the case of *El Angel Negro*, the issue of mental illness is not in question; the person who is obsessive and potentially mentally ill has already arrived at that state. Instead, Bustillo Oro explores the kind of emotional impact that he can create within the world of the film; how a world becomes suffused with danger and menace because of a combination of past sinful criminality and a tacitly present sense of invasive, engulfing desire. Specifically, Bustillo Oro brings his expressionistic cinematography to show how the murderous obsession of a deranged, illegitimate half-sister and the murky worlds of possessive desire, echoes of past violation, and an unwholesome attachment spill out into the audience who perceives the way that the fabric of the daylight, polite world can be ripped asunder. The audience feels the vulnerability, not only to their person, but also to the potential of being classified as an outcast, or shunned due to one's origins. In this case, the emotions are not created in order to feel compassion or empathy, but to intensify the sense of revulsion and menace. The danger is palpable; the assault on one's values is recognizable. The audience feels relief when the evil woman kills herself and order is restored to the world. And thus it is that horror serves a normative purpose and could be viewed as a kind of "rhetoric of conservation." Bustillo Oro's excursion into the depths of depravity end as the holiest and most revered of religious figures, the beloved Virgin of Guadalupe, essentially breaks the evil spell and reunites the family, and reilluminates the sin-darkened world.

In *El Angel Negro* (1942), Bustillo Oro creates a psychological drama that pushes the envelope on earlier films that established the horror genre, such as such classics as *The Mummy* or *Frankenstein*. It is the story of a failed attempt to protect an innocent new bride and her new baby from the jealous intentions of another woman. The fact that the woman was the half-sister of the new wife, and that the man's previous wives had mysteriously died of poisoning, and that the half-sister lived with the burden of a shameful secret of origin (her mother was raped by a man working in the home) and an unwholesome love for her half-brother add not only a sense of the taboo, but also the experience of vicariously stepping outside the norms and order of the polite world.

In looking at Bustillo Oro's oeuvre, while on the surface, *El Angel Negro* may seem rather simplistic, it represents an important aesthetic bridge between his Expressionistic works: the gothic *Dos Monjes* and the campy satire, *Each Madman with His Theme*, and the nostalgic, romantic world of ornate architecture, expansive growth of wealth for the upper class, and intricate social rituals of the time of President Porfirio Díaz (*In the Time of Porfirio Díaz* (1942) and *My Memories of Mexico* (1944)).

While a review of the relatively simple plot gives the impression that the movie is simply about the fact that truth prevails in the end, and justice is restored, the movie itself is much more than that. The non-narrative aspects of the film, namely the Expressionistic lighting and camera angles, and the visual narrative that contains shadowy evocations of evil, go far beyond the simple person of Cristina, and point to a world at least half-saturated with the forces of darkness, underworld, and the chthonic. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* is suggested at times, and in visual allusions and the chiaroscuro with unusual camera angles, the idea of a world where order trembles on the brink of darkness and chaos is suggested. Femininity and womanhood are problematized by the presence of a woman (Cristina) who is aggressively antagonistic to the social and cultural ideas of a "nice" woman. The power lies in the shadows and not in the light, which trembles and may be blown out or otherwise extinguished at any time.

Bustillo Oro has created film that revels in its triumph of the fertile, chaotic, procreative darkness over the light, and which suggests that the horror genre relies on the interplay of order and symmetry, over its ghastly, infernal counterpart. In such a world, Cristina and Elisa are in fact both the one true mother of the son, but as a fused doppelganger, the order containing its own disorder.

SYNOPSIS

Elisa, the daughter of a doting (if rather silly) and indulgent father, is being introduced to society in Mexico City of the 1860s so that she can find a husband. Elisa, who is as beautiful but naive, is drawn to the wealthy, but potentially dangerous widower loner, Jorge Llorente, whose previous two wives died young from mysterious illnesses. It is rumored that he poisoned them. Despite the age difference and the rumors, they marry. However, when Elisa enters Jorge's gloomy mansion, she meets his half-sister, Cristina, who is intensely jealous of any attention. When Elisa gives birth to a baby boy, Jorge is delighted. Cristina positions herself as the primary caregiver and she whispers to Jorge that Elisa had an affair with a male friend, and Jorge is not even the real father. As a result, Elisa is forced to move away and the baby is raised as Cristina's son. Years pass. Elisa and Jorge reunite, and they decide to tell Jorgito who his real mother is. Cristina tries her best to block the news, but is unsuccessful. Jorgito does not believe it, and Cristina poisons herself. Jorgito remains unconvinced until a religious medal containing the Virgin of Guadalupe triggers his memory. The movie ends as the three embrace – a family reunited.

STORY

Setting the Scene: The film opens with a long, slow panning shot and spooky orchestral music as the camera moves through a mysterious, leafy garden in the tropical city of Veracruz and an elegant home with pillars and carvings. Don Luciano, the uncle of orphaned Elisa, argues with his doctor over his health. Don Luciano holds an enormous pipe and a glass of cognac as the doctor prohibits him from indulging in those two vices. The story takes place in the 1850s or 1860s, when the women wore corsets and hoopskirts, and were focused on marrying well. Elisa is marrying age. He speaks with his niece, Elisa, who is the apple of his eye.



Meeting at the Dance: The formal dance ensues, and Don Luciano attends with his gouty leg propped up on an ottoman. In the dance, Don Jorge and Elisa are drawn to each other. Elisa is wearing a blindfold, which is both physically and metaphorically indicative of her ability to see what she was getting herself into. Without blindfolds, and without top hat, the intense attraction is clear, right from the start. Jorge (twice widowed) looks into the eyes of the young, innocent Elisa.



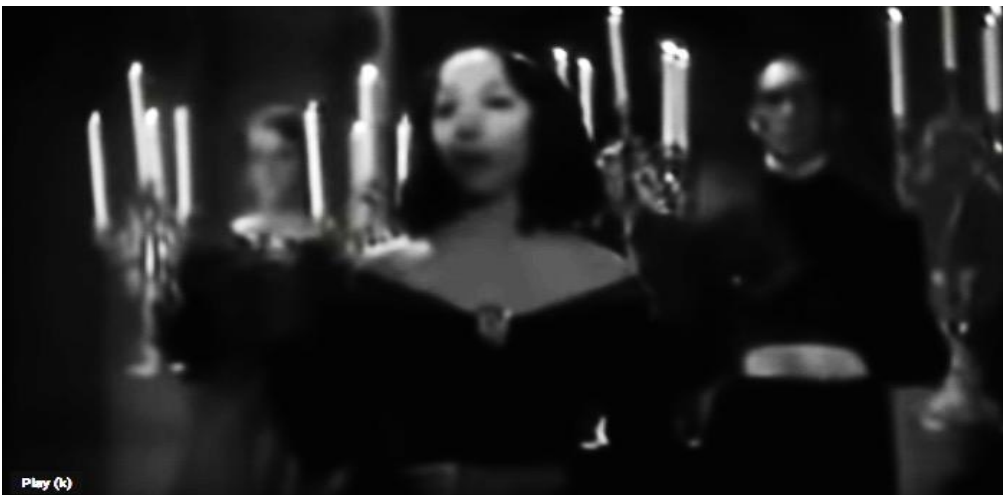
The Wedding Elisa marries Jorge in a beautiful scene in the chapel on the grounds where they kneel in front of a Baroque altar, in spite of the fact that his previous wives died under strange circumstances. Jorge and Elisa kneel in the church as the priest administers the marriage rites. The lighting and the shadows on the side panels of the doors create an ominous mood.



Christina After the wedding, the couple goes to live in the highly creepy Gothic mansion owned by Jorge, but inhabited by a host of characters, including his creepy half-sister, Cristina, fruit of the rape of his mother by the butler. That detail is not revealed to Elisa. He only says to Elisa, "You will meet a very strange woman – the housekeeper. I've put her over you to take care of you. Please follow along and keep quiet." "But why?" "Please don't ask. It's a family secret and it's very painful." Of course this piques Elisa's curiosity. They live in a hacienda that resembles a combination of gothic castle and Spanish hacienda. Cristina, who wears elegant, Spanish-influenced satin and silk dresses, and wears her hair in dark, smooth curls, follows Elisa everywhere. She sneaks into rooms, appears while Elisa is asleep in bed. Slowly, Elisa starts to suffer from nerves. Don Jorge assures her that everything is fine.



The otherworldly beauty of the life-size painting of Cristina which hangs on the wall in the gloomy mansion / castle where Jorge lives.



Cristina, surrounded by candles, nevertheless, has a face partially in the shadows. Her skin glows, which emphasizes her seductive power.

Pregnancy: Elisa is pregnant, and Cristina is in rapture. She hugs herself with joy and whispers, “A baby! Jorge’s baby!” and it is clear that she considers herself pregnant (not Elisa). This is one of the earliest and clearest signs of the depth of her delusions and obsessions. In 19th-century Mexico, to be born out of wedlock, and particularly as the result of a violent crime, makes people recoil in the highly Catholic country. Cristina only learned of her actual parentage on the deathbed of her mother, who confessed it, swearing Jorge and Cristina to secrecy.

Baby Shortly Elisa and Jorge have a son. Cristina is filled with envy and decides to separate Jorge and Elisa. Cristina is silent and appears when no one expects her, and she makes it clear that she will not ever let Elisa have full control of her child.



Cristina carries the newborn baby boy to show him to Jorge, as though the baby were her own.

Secrets: Jorge tells Elisa the truth – his mother was attacked by the butler who had a fit of madness and violated Jorge’s mother when the father was away on a business trip. The infamy was too much and the butler committed suicide. Jorge’s father died shortly after. For years, everyone tried to ignore the truth. Everyone has been held hostage by the horrible secret. Jorge explained that there was no reason to feel afraid of Cristina and that she had no reason to hurt the little baby. Elisa explains she still feels fear when she sees Cristina.

Cristina Curses: Cristina heard everything, and she is enraged, outraged. And she vows to never forgive Jorge, and will never rest until Jorge pays for having revealed the shameful secret. In the meantime, time passes and Elisa teaches little Jorgito a rhyme – “Cruz, cruz venga Jesús” so that making a sign of the cross means that all demons will flee. As she explains that, Cristina shoots her an evil, side-long glance.



Cristina expresses her obsession with Jorge, and is devious, obsessive and evil.

Cristina's Trickery: Little Jorgito is growing and Jorge continues to be a devoted father and husband. Cristina is seething with jealousy and comes up with a plot to get Eliza out of the picture. A young mining engineer, Miguel Díaz, is infatuated with Elisa, but he knows it is hopeless. However, Cristina tells Miguel that Elisa finds him fascinating, and she even forges a few love notes. Jorge trusts Miguel and wants to hire him for mineralogical evaluations of the mining operations that he has. Cristina continues to play games, to the point that Miguel thinks that Elisa truly loves him. Just as Miguel has decided to declare his love, and then is angry when Elisa rebuffs him, Jorge returns from a hunting trip. Miguel leaves Elisa's room, which Jorge witnesses. In the corner, Cristina is smiling diabolically.

Falsely Accused Elisa begs Jorge to listen to her side and to explain that she has been faithful. Cristina taunts her and explains that Jorge despises her. She is diabolically smug and explains that Jorge wants her to leave, and that now, Cristina will have complete control of Jorgito (whom she considers her own). When Elisa looks for Jorgito, she sees that Jorge is taking off with his horse and coach. Elisa witnesses Jorge's departure with her son, and as she leaves, Cristina comments coldly, “Things have just gotten much simpler.” A thunderstorm with lightning suddenly unleashes its violence.

Elisa exiled for 18 Years: Elisa returns to live with her uncle in his house in the dark tropical environment of Veracruz. After a vivid dream, Don Luciano explains that he considers Elisa a saint and in no way capable of the things that were accused of her. Cristina raises the baby as if it were her own for 18 years and thus erasing all memories of his real mother.

As if from a Dream: Jorge returns to Veracruz to find Elisa after 18 years. He returns to beg for her forgiveness, because he was blind. For years, Cristina continued to taunt him and say calumnies about Elisa, to point that she claimed that Miguel had run off with Elisa. Jorge went on long, extremely arduous wanderings. Finally, after his odyssey, he recovered his vision of the truth.



Confronting Cristina: Elisa and Jorge return to Jorge's home to confront Cristina. Jorge wants to determine the motive for the evil behavior. She confesses that all those years they lived as brother and sister, she was in love with her brother. She had, in fact, poisoned all of Jorge's wives so she could keep him for herself. In the meantime, she wanted more than anything to be Jorge's wife and the mother of his child. Jorge is horrified and disgusted – he asks her to please stop declaring her love, and to stop claiming she is the true mother of little Jorgito (how in his early 20s).

Cristina poisons herself. However, before dying, she summons the son she raised to not forget her, and to not let them make him believe she is not his mother. Elisa and Jorge, without knowing what happened, decide to reveal the truth to their son, who immediately despises his true mother and demands that she leave the house. The son does not accept Elisa as his mother.





The Miracle of the Virgin of Guadalupe: Before leaving the house, and at her wits' end, she begs her son to accept a religious medal containing the Virgin of Guadalupe which he was given when he was young. The son took the medal and angrily made a motion to throw it in the fire in the fireplace. But, upon seeing the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, his memory was restored and he realized that Elisa is, in fact, his true mother. He runs to his mother and they embrace, reunited after so many years. Jorge also embraces his son, and they are together as a family.





THEMES

Forbidden Love: The forbidden, taboo, and unhealthy desire of Cristina for her half-brother Jorge is the primary energy that drives the film forward. The fact is presented in a way to generate revulsion; further, the story of Cristina's parentage is presented as unnatural and something that should not exist in the natural world. It represents disorder and a blasphemy against God. The unnaturalness and terror of it is heightened by the fact that Cristina is stunningly beautiful; presumably no man could possibly resist her infernal seductive power. The film maintains a disturbing ambiguity with respect to whether or not she and Jorge are or ever have been lovers. The suggestion is that "yes," and sexual jealousy is what drives her murderous rage toward his wives.

Obsession: Cristina is obsessed with Jorge, but the focus changes when Elisa enters the picture. Cristina's obsession changes its focus which places Elisa in a terrifying level of danger. Obsession is the energy that holds together a world that is disintegrating into an unknowable and ontologically unstable world of always flickering candlelight, shadow, and menace.

The fruit of violation begets violence: Also at the heart of the story is the idea of inversion and an evil counterpart for everything that one sees in the polite world. Cristina is an evil counterpart of Elisa. Whereas Elisa's father is a mild-mannered whimsical man who likes to dabble in music and who makes jokes at his own expense, Cristina's father was a rapist. These are powerful cinematographic statements, because they suggest the world at large has the same dynamic, which is to say that the fruit of violation exists around us. Mexican cinema did not have to labor under the Hayes Code as did Hollywood, and the powerful results tell us instantly how much we may have lost due to the Hollywood self-censorship.

Good vs Evil: Evil seems to win. Evil naturally wants to expunge innocence and goodness, while goodness requires agents from another dimension to serve as weapons of righteous, justice, and a restoration of the natural order (the family and the legitimately generated offspring).

Interiority: Bustillo Oro creates a gothic world of interiority in the depths of the castle-like home where Jorge lives with Elisa, his wife, and Cristina, the half-sister installed as the housekeeper. There is little illumination inside except for candles, which appear as single points of light, and of bursts and clusters of wavering and flickering light from candelabras, sconces, tapers, and candle

chandeliers. Needless to say, this is a world of shadows and unseeable depths, a condition that suggests secrets and potentially unknowable depths of consciousness.

Madness: Set in the 1860s, *El Angel Negro* begins as a story about the “season” for young women of Mexico’s elite class in the mid 19th century who attend elegant balls and soirees in an attempt to attract a wealthy suitor. Elisa, the daughter of a dotting (if rather silly) and indulgent father, seems to have the best of all possible chances; at least that is certainly the assessment of the mother of three daughters who will compete in the same pool of men. Elisa, who is as innocent and good as she is beautiful, is ineluctably drawn to the wealthy, but potentially dangerous widower loner, Jorge Llorente, whose previous two (or possibly more) wives died young by sudden illnesses that look a lot like poisoning. Elisa and Jorge are magnetically drawn to each other and their intense connection is palpable. However, when Elisa entered Jorge’s massive, gloomy mansion, things start to become quite strange. Jorge’s half-sister, Cristina, is the housekeeper, and although she tries to conceal it at first, she is intensely jealous of any attention toward Jorge. Jorge does little or nothing to stop the behavior; in fact, he exacerbates the problem by keeping a life-size portrait of her in a main hall, and by letting her have access to Elisa. When Elisa gives birth to a baby boy, Jorge is delighted and relieved. Almost immediately, Cristina positions herself as the primary caregiver, to the point that it seems that she does not want to release the baby to Elisa or Jorge. Eventually, Cristina’s possessiveness and erratic behavior become quite obvious to Elisa, and she complains to Jorge. In the meantime, Cristina catches Jorge’s ear as she whispers to him that Elisa had an affair with a male friend, and that Jorge is not even the father of Elisa’s son. As a result, Elisa is forced to move away and the baby is raised as Cristina’s son. Years pass. Elisa and Jorge reunite, and they decide to tell Jorge who his real mother is. Cristina tries her best to block the news, but is unsuccessful. Jorge rejects the information, but Cristina believes it is just a matter of time, so she gives herself a lethal dose of poison. Jorge remains unconvinced until a religious medal containing the Virgin of Guadalupe triggers his memory. The movie ends as the three embrace – a family reunited.

CHARACTERS

Jorge Llorente	Wealthy member of the elites; a widower who marries Elisa
Elisa	Innocent and beautiful young woman who marries Jorge
Cristina	Jorge’s half-sister
Don Luciano	Elisa’s father, a prosperous but rather silly man
Doña Meche	Mother of three marriageable daughters
Doctor Bustamente	Don Luciano’s doctor

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Cristina: As the illegitimate half-sister of Jorge, and a product of violation, Cristina exists as the embodiment of horror, especially if we are to consider horror to be existential condition of being incapable of entering society, possessing an acceptable body, or ever being “whole” or “clean.” Horror contains the presence of the shunned and marginalized, and then positions a force or presence that threatens to invade or engulf the purest, most innocent, or loftiest of the dominant society. Sometimes the presence is something inorganic, such as a vibration, a tone, a virus, or spirits, all of which can attack the vulnerable in the in-group of the community and destroy their physical or emotional health. More commonly, the presence is physical and can be a person or entity in that transitional “half-state” – an entity that violates all the culture’s taboos or ideas of health, beauty, moral rectitude, or spiritual integrity. We can see these often in the form of zombies, vampires, “undead” of any kind, bestial half-human blends, and more. Women are particularly vulnerable to being considered a corrupting force because their unique ability to give birth, and also for their potential to destabilize the family, the community, and society. Generally speaking, female sexuality is that force, because not only does it potentially randomize the gene pool and disrupt family alliances and units, it also works on the presupposition that the male of the species is by nature weak due to his libido. The underlying belief is, stronger and more virile

the male, the weaker he is to female seduction. On the other hand, there is nothing at all that will seduce the seductress or the deranged female.

And so you have Cristina. She is not a complex character; in fact, she is so devoid of complexity that she might as well be an undead character – an undead minion subjugated and acting at someone's behest. She demonstrates why female desire is so dangerous. Not only does it directly attack a man in his weakest points, there is something predatory about it. In this case, Cristina kills her rivals and then, in the last case, steals the baby to raise as her own. There are echoes of folk tales, with witches and gypsies figuring into the common imagination.

Beautiful: Cristina is an beautiful woman, much loved by her brother, who commissioned an enormous portrait to be painted of her, which he placed prominently in the great hall of his spooky castle, which glowed in the combination of firelight and candlelight. The painting, which was approximately life-size with eyes that peered out into the room, made her seem an omniscient presence.

Evil: Cristina is so evil that she's not even a very good anti-hero (or anti-heroine). There is nothing at all redeeming or humanizing about her. Her powerful desire defines her and makes her dangerous: she desires her brother and will kill anyone who gets in the ways; she desires the fruit of her brother's marriage, and is willing to kidnap the young son. She poisons, literally and figuratively, her brother's marriage, either with chemicals, or with malicious lies.

A Twisted Product of Violation: There was a theory that anything produced in the commitment of a sin would be, by definition, sinful and sinning. Cristina was the product of the violent rape of her mother by the butler. Thus, Cristina was doomed to take on the attributes of her sinful father, as well as being basically rotten to the core due to the sinful union. The community tended to consider the product of rape to be, by definition, twisted and evil. The surprising thing was that she was not born with a cleft palate or a humped back, but perhaps was worse – she was diabolically beautiful (albeit malevolent).

Single-minded: Cristina single-mindedly pursues her desire to eliminate any and all competition for Jorge's attention. She does so in the crudest, most basic way possible: she murders the wives literally, and then kills her reputation (convincing Jorge that Cristina was unfaithful and that the baby's father is a friend of the family (not Jorge). When confronted by Cristina when Jorge is in his early 20s and faced with losing her son, she takes poison and then calls her son, attempting to poison his mind into believing that his father and Elisa would simply be lying about the true parentage.

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. What are the elements of horror in *El Angel Negro*? How does the Expressionistic lighting make a world of horror, where everything that is presented as wholesome and good, is shown to potentially have its infernal, diabolical counterpart lurking in the shadows? To what degree is the world of *El Angel Negro* more in the shadows than the light?
2. How do light and shadow represent the tension between the conscious, rational, ordered and ordering mind, and the unconscious, irrational, disordered and deconstructing mind? Which is more powerful in the world?
3. Cristina is a victim of her circumstances and in many ways just as innocent as the glowingly angelic Elisa. However, she is portrayed in a very different way. Cristina is driven by obsession and an innate urge to destroy all that stands in the way between her and the object of her obsession, Jorge. Cristina possesses agency and is able to do things in the world. In contrast, the good and innocent Elisa is simply passive and can only try evasive actions to the point that it is Elisa who must leave, and not Cristina. How is the film undermining the notion of virtue in

women by imbuing Cristina with so much self-determination and agency? Please point to specific examples.

4. Jorge is complicit in the murders of his wives because he must suspect Cristina, and yet does nothing to stop what has happened. How does the film suggest that he and Cristina are, in fact, an infernal coupling and a violation of nature? In doing so, how does the film suggest other perversions of nature, and how do those perversions become the heart and substance of "horror." With that in mind, how would you define "horror"?

5. Describe the role of the medal of Virgin of Guadalupe. How does it trigger a memory that is powerful enough to restore order? How does this essential Mexicanness contribute to the ultimate restoration of order and nature? What statement is it making about the power and goodness of Mexican identity, rather than simply the tenets of Catholicism in exorcising evil? Describe the normative role of the medal of the Virgin of Guadalupe in *El Angel Negro*.