

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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VICTIMS OF SIN / Victimas Del Pexado (1951)

Emilio Fernández

Genre: Melodrama

Link to film: <https://youtu.be/uGP5APqaA9o>

OVERVIEW

The second of Emilio Fernández's "cabareteras," which feature the lives of people living and working in the red light district of Mexico City, where the lively music and dance in the cabarets attract people from all walks of life. As in *Salon Mexico*, Fernández examines the lives of the vulnerable and unprotected in this world. The story involves the fight to intervene and shield the vulnerable from harm, and to nurture them however possible. In a film that would never have been possible in Hays Code-restricted USA, we see how the gritty, almost unbearably naturalistic cinema of Emilio Fernández with photographer Gabriel Figueroa gives rise to multi-faceted, deep characters. A first blush, we may think that a world where a new mother will discard her newborn in the trash is unredeemable. However, the passionate commitment that a young Latin dancer, Violeta, has toward the discarded baby rehumanizes a world of rapid change, social inequality, and vicious abuse to women.

SYNOPSIS

Rosa, who is the now-spurned girlfriend of Rodolfo, owner of the very successful Changoo Cabaret, which features live dance performances, music, and entertainment (dance for hire, and next door, sex for hire), has just given birth to a baby boy. Rodolfo is the father, but he absolutely refuses to acknowledge it, and suggests she throw the baby in the trash. Desperate to please him so that he will continue to pay attention to her, Rosa puts the baby in the trash. A fellow dancer at Changoo, Violeta, learns about it and rescues the baby from the trash. She raises the baby as her own, even though to do so means many setbacks and much physical and verbal abuse. After losing her job at the Changoo for supporting the baby, Violeta falls back on sex work to support the two of them. In the process, she meets Santiago, who offers her a job at La Maquina Loca. A chance encounter with Rodolfo, who tries to kidnap the child with the intent of disposing of him, brings all the women in the block to the rescue, and ultimately results in Rodolfo being sentenced to 6 years in prison. Violeta remembers Santiago's offer, and she takes him up on it. She is an instant success, and she dances and works at La Maquina Loca. Santiago, who is deeply in love with Violeta, partners with her to raise Juanito as their son. Things go well until Rodolfo is released from prison. He hunts down Violeta, kills Santiago, and then proceeds to verbally and physically assault Juanito. Knowing that he might kill Juanito, Violeta shoots Rodolfo. Consequently, she is sent to prison where she worries and feels helpless knowing that little Juanito has to fend for himself on the street and find a way to support himself. Seeing Juanito's plight, and his heroic efforts to earn a living plus buy his mother bread and shoes, as Violeta worries herself sick over her inability to protect him, the Matron and the Prison Director have mercy and successfully petition the commutation of her sentence. On Mother's Day, Violeta and Juanito are able to walk together out of the prison and toward a new life.

THE STORY

NEWBORN BABY The film opens with a scene from the red light district of Mexico City at night, where neon lights emblazon the name of the club, "Cabaret Changoo." Inside, there is a dance floor with singing and new dance performances, such as the mambo, rumba, and other Cuban dance types. Rodolfo, the owner, is a Zoot-suit wearing "pachuco" thug. His previous girlfriend (now discarded), Rosa, has just given birth. Rodolfo is the father, but is not accepting responsibility. Rosa begs him, but his only response is to slap her in the face, hit her. In the meantime, the "ficheras" (women who work in the club and entertain patrons to encourage them to buy drinks) are horrified.



Rosa, the now discarded ex-girlfriend of Rodolfo, has just given birth to Juanito. The father is Rodolfo, but he will have nothing to do with her or the baby.



"It's me or the baby!" retorts Rodolfo. Instead of providing support, he points to a municipal garbage can and directs her to throw her baby in the trash.

TRASH CAN When they return, Rosa will not take the baby. She continues to beg Rodolfo. He tells her to choose between him or the baby. They are on the street and he points to a trash can. "Dump it in there." She does and then follows him to continue her role as look-out person for an armed robbery. Rosa finally tells her about the trash can. Violeta runs out the door and down the street. She snatches the baby and takes it back to the Cabaret Changoo, where she and the other women take care of the little baby boy. Rodolfo steadily refuses to have anything to do with the child, and when Violeta shouts at him, he hits her and tells her to leave. She has lost her job.



PROSTITUTION The infant, Juanito, needs food and care. Months pass and things go from bad to worse. Violeta is forced to stand on the street in front of her little room and to prostitute herself. Behind drapings for walls, a crude cradle hangs suspended by a rope from the ceiling.



GOOD MAN:SANTIAGO One night, as she is first reduced to working the street, a notices Violeta. He talks to her, senses her anxiety, and decides to use her services. He hears the baby cry and he looks at Juanito, commenting that his son looked the same at 9 months of age. He places money next to the baby and then speaks to Violeta, offering her a job at the Cabaret La Maquina Loca if she would be interested. His name is Santiago, and he is the owner of the cabaret.



LA MAQUINA LOCA (THE CRAZY MACHINE, OR CRAZY TRAIN) The Maquina Loca is located right next to the railroad tracks, where coal-fired locomotives would frequently travel. Colloquially referred to as a “machine,” the trains were dark black, and spewed huge clouds of dark, black smoke. La Maquina Loca is an extremely popular nightclub, and is, in essence, a competitor of El Changoo, except that the owner is not a criminal thug.

BRUTAL RODOLFO Rodolfo, the owner of the Changoo, happens to encounter Violeta as she stands on the street in front of the room she lives in and uses for clients. She is startled to see him, and he enters, not to harm her, he says, but to make a good business proposition. He then hears Juanito, and tells Violeta that the baby is his. Violeta takes the baby to defend him, and Rodolfo starts beating her, really punching hard. She screams, and her room is suddenly swarmed by 20 or 30 women who, with no regard to their own safety, descend on him and incapacitate him.

RUDOLFO GOES TO PRISON Violeta, Rodolfo, and the entire cadre of many women are taken in for questioning. Rodolfo starts by saying that he had never (and would never) hit a woman, which is absurd, given that all 25 women rescued Violeta from his brutal beating. Violeta explained that he was trying to kidnap and possibly kill, Juanito. She calls him a murderer because of the way he forced Rosa to place Juanito in the trash can. Rodolfo is arrested and sent to prison for 6 years. As he is taken away, he looks at Violeta and tells her that one day he will be out. It is a threat.

MAQUINA LOCA Remembering the kindness of Santiago, the owner of La Maquina Loca, Violeta bundles up her baby and takes him with her to visit the Maquina Loca. As she makes her way, she must cross a bridge and walk near the train tracks as trains roar down the track with their mad, loud train whistle and the dark, thick, black clouds of smoke. With the full moon and the wind, the atmosphere is surreal and threatening. When she goes inside, she sees it is an extremely popular place. Santiago has been reading the paper where both Violeta and Rodolfo's faces appear on the front page of the newspaper: **CRIME BOSS TAKEN DOWN**. Santiago acknowledges her, and offers her a job. He also says she can keep the baby on site, and he gives her money for a dress.

DANCER The women working in the club instantly like Violeta and adore little Juanito. They lend Violeta a dress so she can get started working right away. She is instantly successful with the patrons, and things go well. One day, when the cabaret dancer suddenly quit in a huff, Violeta offers to dance. Santiago gives her a chance and he is surprised and impressed by her talent in dancing the mambo and the rumba. She becomes known for her dance performances, and things go well.



FAMILY Santiago, who is in love with Violeta, asks her to live with him and they raise little Juanito as his mother and father. He is christened in the Catholic church, and then has his first birthday. Other birthdays continue until a flash to his sixth birthday. He enjoys his cake and presents, and then returns to the boarding school where he stays during the week.



RODOLFO KILLS SANTIAGO Rodolfo is released from prison and finds out that Violeta is working at La Maquina Loca. Santiago intercepts Rodolfo who enters as Violeta is dancing. They go outside and struggle. Rodolfo takes out a gun and shoots Santiago multiple times, killing him.



VIOLETA KILLS RUDOLFO Rodolfo is able to take Juanito and Violeta is not able to stop him. Rodolfo takes Juanito to his home, and is extremely cruel to him. He shouts at Juanito. He then starts beating him. At that moment, Violeta breaks in through a large French door-type window. She has a gun with her and she shoots Rodolfo dead.



PRISON Violeta is sent to prison, and Juanito visits her each Sunday. He lives on the streets and tries to support himself by selling newspapers and shining shoes. He is able to bring bread and flowers to his mother every Sunday.



RELEASED FROM PRISON Juanito scrambles to try to buy his mother shoes, since he noticed that she is barefoot in the prison. He manages to do so, but it was a difficult task and he arrives just after visiting hours have passed. The Prison director is quite worried as the Matron tells him that Violeta is dying of worry about her little boy on the streets with no one to protect him. The Prison Director is able to find extenuating circumstances and they are able to arrange for her release on Mother's Day. He falls asleep next to the gate, and the Prison Director sees him. "Don't be afraid," he says. "You and I can give your mother a special Mother's Day present -- her freedom!" The film ends with a voiceover as Juanito and Violeta walk out through the prison gates, hand in hand, ready for a new start of a new life.



THEMES

Motherhood: In seeing Rosa's psychological enslavement to an abuser who demanded she choose him over their son, and literally demanded she put the baby in a municipal trash bin, the film asks one fundamental question: What does it mean to be a mother? Violeta has never had a child. Nevertheless, she is willing and able to love him as though he were her son, and never questions how hard she will have to work to keep him fed, clothed, and healthy. She loves little Juanito unconditionally and is very protective.

Sacrifice: Violeta sacrifices a good job, income, safety, secure lodging, dignity, and stability all so that she can provide for little Juanito. Rosa also makes a sacrifice, but hers is tantamount to human sacrifice as she literally places Juanito in the trash after Rodolfo suggests it and even shows her which trash can to use. Rosa is sacrificing herself as well, but it is a terrible sacrifice, more like immolation of the self, to demean and degrade herself in her abject dependency on Rodolfo.

Generosity: Acts of generosity pervade this very dark "cabaretera" film that could never have been made with such graphic honesty in the United States with its Hays Code. The "ficheras" and dancers at Cabaret Changoo contribute their earnings to pay the hospital so they can take little Juanito home. After Rosa puts him in the trash, Violeta generously gives of herself to take care of him. Santiago is a generous provider of safety, refuge, and a home. Later, the Warden of the women's prison describes how Violeta's worry for her son is literally killing her, and advocates for an early release. The prison Director is a kind-hearted man who sees the truth of the argument and is generous in spirit, causing Violeta's sentence to be reduced due to extenuating circumstances. His generosity resulted in Violeta's commuted sentence and her freedom.

CHARACTERS

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| Violeta | Cabaret dancer specializing in Latin dances |
| Rodolfo | Owner of the cabaret, Changoo |
| Rosa | Rodolfo's discarded ex-girlfriend, gives birth to Juanito |
| Juanito | Baby born from the union of Rosa and Rodolfo |
| Rita | Club singer and staunch defender of the weak and vulnerable |
| Santiago | Kind-hearted owner of the competing cabaret, La Maquina Loca |
| Prison Director | Over the prison where Violeta is serving her sentence |

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Violeta: The protagonist is an unlikely heroine because she has no real power or authority in the world. She is a talented dancer and "fichera" (entertains patrons to get them to buy drinks) who works in cabarets in the red light district and earns money through sex work. Her desire to rescue the baby born of a fellow "fichera" unable to psychologically free herself from an abusive relationship is what launches the entire story.

Selfless: Coming to the rescue of an hours-old baby was an act of selflessness and self-sacrifice inasmuch as it resulted in her being summarily fired from her job. In order to provide food and shelter for the baby, Violeta was compelled to enter into a lower level of sex work than she had been doing in the club, and any earnings from dancing or promoting drink sales were no longer possible.

Compassionate: Not only was Violeta compassionate toward Juanito, she also felt compassion for Rosa, Juanito's mother. She shouted at Rosa in order to learn where the baby was, but she could see very clearly that Rosa was unable to psychologically break from the violently toxic relationship she had with him.

Courageous: Violeta is willing to do what it takes to protect the defenseless. She slapped Juanito's mother, Rosa, until she told her where she had dumped the baby, and she fiercely defended Juanito when his criminal father, Rodolfo attempted to kidnap him. Later, when Rodolfo started to mercilessly beat six-year-old Juanito, Violeta came in through the window and shot him.

Santiago: The owner of La Maquina Loca. We do not get much of a back story, but we do know that he lost a young son and that he is not married. He likes mariachi music, and he also enjoys strolling down the sex worker street and occasionally paying one for her services.

Generous: Responsive to people's needs, Santiago makes La Maquina Loca a place where people are paid well and they are treated with respect. Above and beyond that, he gives money for the welfare of the vulnerable, and he provides for little Juanito, including making sure he has a good education, is healthy, and knows he is loved.

Sensitive: When Violeta is hired by Santiago, she refers to him as "Don Santiago," which would suggest he is the patron of a ranch and of elevated rank. Santiago responds, "There are no 'Don's' in La Maquina Loca. We are a democratic organization." He is sensitive to people's need for acceptance and inclusion. He is also sensitive to needs and their feelings, and moves Violeta to tears when he gives her money for the child's welfare upon first meeting her.

GUIDING QUESTIONS:

1. What happens in the cabaret? Who are the different people who work and visit the cabaret, and what are their roles.
2. Describe the train tracks, the trains, and the smoke that pours out of the locomotive smoke stack. What are some of the potential metaphorical and metaphysical implications?

3. Dances – mambo, rumba, boogie-woogie. Who danced? What was their function in the film? How did they advance the action of the film? What did they represent?
4. Toxic masculinity is in full display in this film. Describe the ways in which Rodolfo exhibits toxic masculinity. What is the impact on those around him? Women? Children?
5. How and when to women protect each other? Find examples.

RECOMMENDED READING

Aviña, R., Vigne-Pacheco, A., & Lebre, P. (2000). los ritmos populares en el cine mexicano / les rythmes populaires dans le cinéma mexicain. *Cinémas d'Amérique Latine*, 8, 41–55. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42598251>

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