HUMANITIES INSTITUTE Susan Smith Nash, Ph.D.

ROSENDA (1948)

Julio Bracho (Mexico)

Drama - Spanish

Location: https://youtu.be/KoWnX9pEatU

OVERVIEW

Based on a novel by José Rúben Romero, Rosenda is set in the late 1930s in a rural area of the Mexican state of Michoacan. As a part of Contemporaneos, a Mexico City-based group of modernist writers, and also in experimental theatre, Bracho's approach was to align with the Neorealists, and to explore the tensions between what appears on the surface and what is often hidden, along with the disruptive sources that destabilize psyches, worlds, and ultimately, being.

Auteur At the time that he completed *Rosenda*, Julio Bracho was one of the best-known directors in Mexico, and his films were also highly regarded in Europe and the United States. Trained in the theatre and dedicated to avant-garde and experimental approaches, Bracho brought bold visual experimentation to his films, and he made a name for himself exploring psychological states of mind, and the consequences for individuals who break out of the roles and places they have inhabited. The courage required to upset expectations and to move beyond society's strictures represents a struggle that resonates with the audience; the protagonists are two who have united to blossom into new identities, forged by love. The external world of inner and outer spaces, is both the nurturing cocoon and the dangerous open space, and navigating them can be fraught with risk. Bracho's worlds are dynamic ones, where trains, cars, and transatlantic steamers transport individuals to metaphysical and emotional spaces as well as to different geographies.

Film Rosenda represents a high point in Bracho's work, in the sense that this, more than any other film, becomes an interplay of visual metaphors, in a method that is neither melodramatic nor gothic, but subtle, graceful, and tinged with nostalgia. In a scene reminiscent of another of Bracho's films, Stolen Paradise, the train windows create frames to scenes only dreamed about – the faces of the beloved, supposed to have been long lost and but never forgotten. The most beloved film by the acclaimed director in the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema, Julio Bracho, Rosenda (1948) is a beautiful melodrama that explores the power of love to cross class barriers and to transform. Set in rural Michoacán during the 1930s, when vestiges of the revolutionary war animated individuals to take up arms and plunder the wealth of landowners, townspeople, and the Catholic Church, the film captures not only the political backdrop of the time, but also the time-honored customs and traditions of people who lived in the little towns, or pueblitos. The film was nominated for six Ariel awards (the Mexican equivalent of the Oscars). While the film centers on the love story between Don Ponciano and Rosenda, with the interloper villain, Salustio, it is made into an expressionistic masterpiece with the stunning cinematography of photographer Jack Draper, and the film techniques (long establishing shots, slow panoramas, dramatic point of view). The Michoacan pueblo is a blend of interior and exterior shots, which create a subtle and emotionally impactful visual narrative that portrays the inner and unseen workings of the heart, versus the appearances presented to the outside world, which constitute the initial reality. The tension between appearance (and class stratification based on appearances and origins) and the internal dynamic of transformative love and personal growth and development, is portrayed through close-ups, the use of light and shadow (chiaroscuro), and other film techniques. The incorporation of details from typical life in a small Mexican town allows Bracho to make the pueblo function as a main character of the story, just as he did with Mexico City in Another Dawn.

CHARACTERS

Don Ponciano Robles Rosenda Father Rubio Salustio Hernández Doña Pomposa Owner of a dry goods store and respected town businessman Beautiful young woman from a poor "ranchito" Parish priest and best friend of Don Ponciano Head of a group of revolutionary ruffians, pursues Rosenda Runs a dress-making business, friend of Don Ponciano

STORY

Rosenda is a beautiful young woman, but disdained for being a poor "ranchera" (from the country), unschooled and untrained. When she plans to marry a man against her father's will, and the man then disappears, precipitating her father's banishment, Rosenda is cast out of her home in the parched countryside. Don Ponciano, the kind-hearted owner of a prospering dry goods store in town, takes pity and takes her under his wing. He gives her a job, a place to stay, and even teaches Rosenda to read and write. Despite the age difference, love flowers between them, and Don Ponciano marries her. Unfortunately, not all is connubial bliss in their world. Salustio, the fiancé who jilted Rosenda returns to town, hardened into criminal bandit leader, who uses the revolution as a convenient pretext for theft, intimidation, and violence. Salustio and his bandido cohorts are a surly and despicable lot; they terrorize the countryside with larcenous violence, and when they arrive at the pueblo where Rosenda and Don Ponciano are living quite happily, they target Don Ponciano. Not only does Salustio want to destroy Don Ponciano's business and terrorize the town, he wants to murder Don Ponciano himself and spirit away Rosenda. Suspecting there would be conflict, Don Ponciano packs Rosenda's clothes, writes a letter of introduction, and send her on her way to visit his elderly maiden aunts, who live in a nearby town. Rosenda leaves just in time. Calling himself the "General" of his band of criminals, Salustio orders his men to attack the town. They capture many men, including Don Ponciano and Father Rubio, who are taken away by train. In town with Don Ponciano's maiden relatives, Rosenda worries when no mail arrives from Don Ponciano. One day she goes to the post office, accompanied by the maid. On her way, she stops at a news stand to purchase guava candies, when she reads the headlines that the bandit leader, "General" Salustio has been killed. Next to it is an account that both Don Ponciano and Father Rubio were reported to have been hanged by the bandits. Grief-stricken, Rosenda returns to the little Pueblito where she and Don Ponciano had been so happy. Once there, she is urged to open up the dry goods store and to live there, since she is Don Ponciano's legal wife. However, she only wants to lose herself and be forgotten. Don Ponciano who actually did manage to escape and remain alive, returns to the little town and to his once happy home. There, he is absolutely devastated to find that Rosenda, believing him dead, left without leaving even one small trace. He tells his friends that he will leave the little town forever, and that he does not want anyone to do anything special for him as he leaves. He just wants to forget and to be forgotten. Coincidentally, after purchasing tickets for a train headed in the opposite direction, Rosenda is headed to the country where she plans to live a simple life with the little son she had with Don Patricio.



SCENES

Don Ponciano arrives at the small town in the state of Michoacán. The owner of a thriving dry goods store (abarrotes), Don Ponciano is respected in the town, and is often called upon for services to the community.



Speaking with townspeople who approach him for small business loans, support for their businesses, Justice of the Peace, and other types of services and favors, Don Ponciano is comfortable in the stable "nest" of his store.

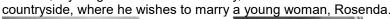


Showing his grace and kind-heartedness, Don Ponciano listens to the request of a young girl who wishes to borrow money for treats. This scene and others establish Don Ponciano as a remarkably generous and patient man, and a pillar of the little community, which in appearance and function, harkens back to the Mexico of colonial times. There is an implicit nostalgia and longing for times when a good man could

protect members of the little town.



Salustio, a young man of the community, entreats Don Ponciano to travel to a little ranchito in the





Don Ponciano and Señor Petrea travel together on foot to the poor, tiny farm where Rosenda lives with her father in a hard-scrabble subsistence manner.



In a beautiful point of view shot, Rosenda is silhouetted against the clouds, suggesting dreams, expansiveness, and connection to nature. Her little dog stands faithfully near her, as her father



Rosends looks back at the small little farm where she lives with her father. Because Salustio has not asked permission for her to marry him, and because he is ultimately a "no-show," Rosenda is cast out of her home for disobedience to her father. Don Ponciano takes pity on her and offers to help her find a

place to stay in town while she tries to determine what to do.



This two-shot shows the age difference between Don Ponciano and Rosenda, and the arid, almost barren land behind her creates a visual metaphor that conveys the barrenness of her future, contrasted with the first scenes, where she stands against a backdrop of expansive, gorgeous, limitless sky (and by extension her future).



The callow young man, Salustio, has decided to rise up against the status quo and become a criminal, but one who cloaks himself in the costume of a revolutionary. He uses the Mexican Revolution, which is still playing out in the countryside, to masquerade as a "general," when in fact he is organizing a criminal

gang that attacks and thieves from honest Mexican citizens.



To his consternation, Don Ponciano encounters Rosenda in her daily ablutions, clothed only in soap lather in the outdoor shower in the colonial-style house where she is living. He is shy, and respects her modesty, but is clearly attracted to her. It is a comical scene, which shows a touching growth of mutual admiration.



Don Ponciano discusses the situation with Rosenda with his friend, Señor Petrea.



In the dry goods store, Don Ponciano provides for Rosenda's basic needs, and takes her to the part of the store where there is a seamstress who will make new blouses, skirts, and undergarments for Rosenda.



Getting tongues wagging with her smart new shoes (before she was barefoot). Buying fruits and

vegetables at the market.



Don Ponciano is eager to teach Rosenda to read and write. Here they are in the house where Rosenda lives. The doors and French windows are opening, letting in light, creating a visual metaphor of illumination and the opening up of the once dark or ignorant mind, allowing it to shine with new knowledge



Growing regard and deep respect for Rosenda's intelligence, hard-working nature, and eagerness to learn.



Rosenda has a bed to sleep on. Before, she was sleeping on blankets on the floor. The perspective is intimate, and this interior shot is a visual metaphor for the calm, nurturing environment that Don Ponciano has made possible for Rosenda.



The passion ignites after Rosenda has spent time living in the pueblito, working in Don Ponciano's dry goods store, and dedicating time to learning to read and write



Visual metaphor – the rainy season starts, deluge outside the adobe walls, visible through the window. The heavens open the floodgates, the mutual attraction between Don Ponciano and Rosenda breaks free, in torrents.



Rosenda reads. Time has passed, and she has applied herself with diligence and dedication to her studies. Consequently she can read, and that ability opens up her vistas and her mental envisioning of a

larger world, which is beautifully suggested in this scene.



Rosenda enjoys reading – a setting that places her squarely in harmony with nature and also her evolving, transforming mind. Lying in the grass, her face pointed heavenward, a visual metaphor for

illumination, as her face glows, as does the hand that holds the pamphlet.



In the plaza of the little pueblito, townspeople celebrate New Year's Eve with traditional artisanal

fireworks, music, and lights forming the new year.



The return of a villain, posturing as a revolutionary freedom fighter, but in reality, a thug and the leader of a band of criminals whose goal is to plunder from the law-abiding residents of the pueblito. Salustio is cruel and represents *Thanatos* (Freud's "death drive) in the community, and also the extreme disrespect for women.



Salustio and his band of thugs spend time at the local cantina, where they drink heavily and carouse with the female workers / entertainers. His drunken, lascivious behavior, and the actions of destruction, theft, and assault represent the outside world intruding into the idyllic little Mexican village and the traditional

lifestyles.



Don Ponciano and Rosenda make their way to the beautiful colonial-era church. The scene emphasizes the persistence of colonial values, and an idealized charm and simplicity of that time.



Father Rubio marries Don Ponciano and Rosenda. The scene is a visual metaphor for rectitude and commitment to doing the right thing in terms of the laws of society and nature



A drunk Salustio is determined to wreak havoc on all who block his way and to seize everything he can. The scene is remarkable in the way that it communicates how Salustio is an indiscriminately destructive



Rosenda is sent to safety in Morelia (although this looks a lot like the aqueducts at Queretaro). She calls on Don Ponciano's maiden aunts. She holds a letter of introduction from Don Ponciano in her hand.



Don Ponciano and Father Rubio are held captive by the "General" Salustio and his band of thug criminals. This is an exterior scene which suggests the individuals vis-à-vis the cosmos; they are powerless against larger forces.



Presenting her letter of introduction from Don Ponciano, the two maiden aunts react with surprise to the news that Don Ponciano is married and that his young wife has come to stay with them to take refuge as bandits overwhelm the town.



Fish out of water: Thoroughly urban, Don Ponciano's maiden aunts look askance at Rosenda as she maintains her more small town ways. She offers to go to the market to purchase food.



Stopping by a newsstand, Rosenda reads the headlines that Don Ponciano Robles and Padre Rubio were hanged by outlaws. She is devastated and believes, as does every person who reads those headlines, that Don Ponciano and Padre Rubio have in fact been murdered. Rosenda's ability to read and write is a double-edged sword – she is aware of the evil of the world as well as the erudite.



Rosenda returns to the pueblo where she and Don Ponciano lived happily. Grief-stricken, she explains that she does not want any of the material goods from the estate. She just wants to forget and to be forgotten.



Exhausted to the point of collapse after a grueling escape, Don Ponciano finds his way back to the pueblo only to learn that Rosenda has left. As a chiaroscuro interior shot, this scene visually represents the

physical and emotional agony he has endured in his separation from Rosenda.



Both Rosenda and Don Ponciano approach the trains, although they are not aware of each other's presence. The train functions as a dynamo and a change agent, but without any intentionality.



In this train scene, Rosenda sits with the son Don Ponciano has never met. What is fascinating about this shot is that it is clearly an interior space, and it reflects the interiorities of Rosenda – her state of mind, her love for her son, and the nostalgic longing for Don Ponciano, whom she believes has been murdered.



As vectors of coincidence, chance, and change, the trains are dynamic, and every person who engages with the train is changed in some way, either moved dimensionally, across time and space, or emotionally altered. Don Ponciano and Rosenda are each oblivious to the fact that they are in trains destined for locations far from each other. They do not suspect that their windows actually look out on each other and they can actually see each other.



In this brilliantly composed frame, Rosenda and Don Ponciano are across from each other, but they do not see each other, due to the fact that they are not looking out the window. This scene builts tension in viewer.



By sheer happenstance, both Rosenda and Don Ponciano look out the window and see each other. It is a moment of incredulity and joy.



In this final scene of the film, Rosenda and Don Ponciano reunite and embrace, and Don Ponciano meets his little son. They are positioned between two trains – a visual metaphor of progress and transport away

from fragmentation and toward unity.



THEMES

Love There are two types of love in Rosenda. First is the transforming, idealistic, generous love which Don Ponciano and Rosenda feel for each other. At first, Don Ponciano views Rosenda as a young woman he has personally committed to protect, and Rosenda looks at him with gratitude as her benefactor. As she demonstrates her interested in learning to read and write, and to learning different skills such as sewing and cooking, Don Ponciano begins to feel a true attachment to her, not only as someone to protect, but also as a dear, kind-hearted, and loyal companion. Don Ponciano is well known for his generosity and his desire to help all achieve their full potential. However, he is a rather lonely man, a bachelor who has grown older and has given up on true love. With Rosenda, he starts to soften – a small rose grows from a crack in hard adobe. Rosenda was grateful that he gave her a place to sleep when she was rejected by her father, but she begins to see Don Ponciano in a different light when he opens up her world and her possibilities by spending the time to teach her to read and write, and also to give her a chance to work in the shop and to have more options for her wardrobe. The second type of love in *Rosenda* is not love at all, but a desire to own or possess. This is what Salustio feels for Rosenda. It is a toxic attachment, and ultimately leads to destruction.

Transformation The space of Rosenda is essentially a metaphysical one, where the personages of Don Ponciano and Rosenda represent the joy of beingness and the process of becoming, as they live in buildings in their little pueblito that appear to have been built in colonial times, fully 400 years before, but which provide spaces for the incubation of love, kindness, consideration, and the building of self-awareness through self-improvement (reading, writing, teaching, listening, nurturing). The counterpoise to the positive transformation of Rosenda and Don Ponciano, is the destructive force of Salustio Hernández, the self-styled "general" of a band of "revolutionaries" (actually bandits). His jealousy and rage for recognition are achieved through destructive means. Not only does he lash out to harm those around him, he is, first and foremost, self-destructive, being shown in almost all scenes as drinking alcohol, encouraging his men to drink, passing out from drinking, and becoming aggressive and hateful. While there is a moral lesson in observing Salustio's self-destruction, it is also a part of the cosmos, which is to say that destruction is required for something to be created anew. Without Salustio's jilting of Rosenda,

she would not have left her father's ranchito. The narrative requires destruction, whether it be in the form of a menacing villain or of erroneous reports (the inaccurate newspaper headlines reporting Don Ponciano's death by hanging).

Jealousy Salustio is extremely jealous of Don Ponciano's attachment to Rosenda, despite the fact that he was the one who failed to fulfill his promises to her. His jealousy manifests in his desire to harm Don Ponciano, and also his physical threats to Rosenda. Jealousy is not always destructive, however. In some cases, it is something that creates just the right spark to keep a budding love ignited. For example, when Don Ponciano spies a few blankets on the floor and a candle in the small dwelling he has made available to Rosenda, his face grows dark and severe, and he demands to know who has been sleeping there. He is not aware that there is no bed in the rooms. When she explains that she has been sleeping there, he is not convinced, but then he does realize it. He buys a bed for the room, much to the curiosity of the townspeople, who watch as laborers carry the various pieces of it on their backs, along with a soft, flexible mattress that can be coiled for convenience.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Don Ponciano

The owner of a very popular and thriving dry goods store, Don Ponciano is hard-working, generous, humorous, and kind. He is a pillar of the little village (pueblito) that preserves its colonial feeling, and, with the exception of the train, has little connection with the outside world and its influences. When businessmen and visiting woman come to town, they are immediately obvious because they dress in clothing from their urban centers. In contrast, the women in town (including Rosenda), garb themselves in traditional raiment, which is to say that they wear a rebozo (long draping scarf), a long, flowing skirt, a open, and very soft-fitting blouse, a piece of fabric wrapped around like a belt, earrings, necklace, and a head-covering (often the rebozo). Don Ponciano wore suits that seemed from the turn of the century (early 1900s).

Idealistic: In the opening scenes of the film, people are in Don Ponciano's store and they are telling them what they need. He is giving them loans, never with any documentation, but it is clear that they will repay it, and that he is a trusted individual, an institution in his little village. He has never married; there is not a lot of discussion about why. He does not find other people in town to be likewise idealistic, except perhaps for his friend, Father Rubio, the priest. For that reason, he is happily surprised to find that Rosenda has a poetic heart, and her learning to read and write has given her the tools and wherewithal to be able to express her profound thoughts about the nature of reality, and also about how much she admires his ways of thinking, speaking and expressing himself.

Generous: As a person who started to provide microloans for community members, and does not charge interest, simply asks for repayment, Don Ponciano is generous with his money. He is also generous with his time and knowledge, which is evidenced by his offering to teach Rosenda to read and to write. He is even generous with Salustio; instead of responding to his aggressions in a like manner, he tricks Salustio into backing down from his threats. It is a temporary victory, but at least he was able to thwart the attempted attacks.

Honorable: Don Ponciano is honorable and treats Rosenda with utmost respect. He is careful not to arouse too much gossip when he starts visiting her every day, and so he tried to find an entrance that is more difficult to see from the street and from neighbors' windows. He is faithful to her, and is proud to be seen with her and to let the town know that he loves her. She is kind-spirited and patient, and the people of the village also respect her. When Salustio's thugs are about to attack the village and try to kidnap him, Don Ponciano thinks ahead – he marries Rosenda in the church (Father Rubio does the ceremony). When she stays with his maiden aunts, she is able to hold her head up high because he has married her.

Rosenda

A "rancherita" from a dry, dusty, tiny farm, where it seems that nothing could possibly grow, In the first scenes with Rosenda, the camera looks up to her as she stands on a small hill, a scruffy farm dog at her side. She is wearing a long, typical skirt, and she asserts that she does not want to marry Salustio. It does not seem to matter – Salustio is nowhere to be seen. Her father is shocked and tells her she must leave. Thus starts Rosenda's new life.

Innocent: Rosenda's life was very isolated and she spent time with her father caring for the tiny little ranch house, the farm animals, and their needs. (cooking, cleaning, etc.). She is innocent and trusting; even after she moved to the village, she keeps her hair in two long braids, which she adorns with big, white bows. Her appearance is neat, even when she is at the rancho, or in the first weeks in town, where she has literally no shoes, no other clothing, and no skills for earning a living. She learns to sew and to cook, and she helps by working at the store. She also spends a great deal of time studying to learn to read and write. Her pureness of heart wins over people in town, and when she goes to stay with her maiden aunts, they are likewise enchanted by her honesty and simplicity.

Trusting: From the very beginning, she trusted Don Ponciano. She assumed he would be honorable, and he was. Her trust in him was well-placed – he did everything he could to make her feel safe and comfortable. When she met the women who worked in Don Ponciano's abarrote dry goods store, she trusted them to treat her well and to not besmirch or impugn her reputation. When she saw the newspaper headlines, it never occurred to her that there might have been an error, and Don Ponciano and Father Rubio in fact escaped rather than being hanged.

Hard-working: Rosenda is eager to work hard and to make life better for others. She immediately starts cleaning, cooking, and doing tasks at the store. She also puts a great deal of effort into her studies, learning how to read and write at a rapid pace. Finally, she works at the maiden aunts' home in the city – she cleans, cooks, goes shopping and runs other errands.

Virtuous: One of Rosenda's salient characteristics is that she is virtuous; she exudes modesty, loyalty, and a quiet spirit. Always dressed modestly in a traditional manner, with neatly braided hair, white cloth ribbons, earrings, and a long skirt, with a loose top, belted around the waist, and a long woven scarf (rebozo) draped around her shoulders, over her head, or crossed along the back for holding a baby, Rosenda's appearance as well as her demeanor and overall mien convey virtue. She is courageous and not afraid to take risks; she traveled to the city to stay with her husband's maiden aunts; and after reading of Don Ponciano's death, she abjured the material goods that were rightfully hers as his widow. Instead, she left to seek a simple life, to forget and to be forgotten. Miraculously, the train windows aligned, they saw and recognized each other, and were united again, this time for the rest of their days.

Visual Metaphors

Views through train windows: The film begins with a train arriving in the little village in Michoacán, and upon entering the town, it is clearly a step into a rather magical, nostalgic world of a traditional Mexican pueblito, where people live in lovely adobe structures built during colonial times. Seeing the protagonists framed in the windows suggests their movement either to or from the pueblo, and reinforces the notion that they are separate, alone – but if they can see each other through the windows, they will have the chance to be reunited and be whole.

Interior of the Abarrote (dry goods store): The scenes are evocative of joyous community and connectedness in a tight-knit community. There is a sense of protection and safety in the cocoon of the interior of the store.

Interior of the maiden aunts' house in the city: The urban furnishings of the aunts' house in the city (presumably Guadalajara or Guanajuato) is utterly alien to Rosenda. It is not at all like her humble "rancho" in the arid chaparral, nor is it like the colonial pueblo where Don Ponciano lives and has his

store. In contrast, the city house is late 19th century, the "Porfiriato" of President Porfirio Diaz, notable for the heavy use of wrought iron and fin-de-siecle "belle epoque" French-influenced furniture and interior design.

The streets and buildings of the pueblo: The exterior walls are old, and the windows are capacious, with designs from the 17th century and earlier. The interiors are Spanish – with adobe, tile floors, heavy wood lintels and door frames. There is a sense of continuity with the past, and also connectedness with the community through traditions. For example, a little girl seeks to purchase a piloncillo – a chunk of unrefined sugar from the "trapiche." In another example, the traditional corn, turbinado sugar, cinnamon, and milk drink is being prepared. There is comfort in the traditions, and a validation of the essence and identity of those who, like Rosenda, who are authentically from the Mexican countryside or pueblitos.

Shoes vs. bare feet: When Rosenda dons little half-boots for the first time, it represents the fact that she has someone who cares for her welfare, perhaps for the first time in her life since the death of her mother. The boots are gifts from Don Ponciano, and while they do set tongues wagging in the town, they only redouble his commitment to her intellectual growth and development. Respecting the realities of small town life, he creates a private entrance for himself to her chambers, and he continues to teach her to read, to write, and to be assured in her own mental capabilities. Many scenes focus on her feet, whether bare or in elegant yet serviceable footwear. The footwear is a visual metaphor for protection and the sheltering aegis of love.

GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- 1. The little village has characteristics that make it nurturing for a woman like Rosenda. Please identify three of the qualities of the village and describe a scene for each that supports the notion.
- 2. Rosenda values traditional Mexican values and ideas of femininity. Many of those are illustrated by the way that she dresses and the kinds of foods she cooks. Please describe three elements of her dress, and two that have to do with her work in the dry goods store.
- 3. How do Don Ponciano and Salustio represent two polar opposites with respect to Mexican manhood? How do they want to interact with Rosenda, and how do they show their feelings for her?
- 4. Describe three interior spaces and explain how they reflect the inner emotional and metaphysical state of the protagonists, Don Poncian and Rosenda. For example, the dry goods store at the beginning of the film represents a refuge, a lighted space in a world of darkness.
- 5. Select three scenes that include a panorama of the exterior, or at least slow tracking shots. What is the emotional impact, and what do they reflect about Rosenda or Don Ponciano? For example, what are some of the deeper meanings embodied in the long tracking shots of trains?