

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE ABSENTEE / La Ausente (1952)

Julio Bracho (Mexico)

Drama - Spanish

Link to film: https://youtu.be/F9_hAcaxmQ

SYNOPSIS:

Sometimes compared to Daphne DuMaurier's novel, *Rebecca*, which Alfred Hitchcock converted into one of his first notable films, Julio Bracho's *La Ausente* also features a husband who remarries after his wife dies under tragic circumstances, and the new bride begins to suspect that her husband is obsessively in love with his dead wife. In *La Ausente*, however, the story is more nuanced, and under Julio Bracho's direction, interior spaces (their home, a cottage on a cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean, offices, and churches, the mysteries and secrets intensify as the film progresses, until all the pieces finally come together. Nominated to appear at the Cannes Film Festival, *La Ausente* is important for its contributions to film noir cinematography and expressionistic film techniques, and also to a masterful film narrative that tells the story through powerful visual metaphors as well as through the script.

CHARACTERS:

Jorge de la Cueva	Wealthy estate owner, husband to Isabel
Mónica Sandoval	Private tutor and nanny, later marries Jorge
Magdalena	Isabel's sister
Isabel	Jorge's beautiful wife, killed in a mysterious car crash
Cecilia	Jorge's sister
Rosita	Jorge and Isabel's young daughter
Doña Elena	Isabel's mother

OVERVIEW:

Auteur: Julio Bracho Gavilán was born in 1909 in Durango, México, into a devoutly Catholic home. He moved with his family to Mexico City, where he received an education and became interested in theatre, especially the avant-garde theatre, including the theatre of the absurd. Bracho debuted with *Ay, qué tiempos, Sr. Don Simón!* In 1941. It was followed by an adaptation of a novel by the Spanish writer, Alarcón, *Historia de un gran amor* (1942), which featured elaborate fiestas, dance, and a typical tension between class, status, and the implicit right to exist. *Distinto Amanecer* (1943) is a departure for Bracho, as he plumbs the depths of the noir genre to create an intersection between the body politic and dark, dangerous forbidden love. Another important work of that time was *Crepúsculo*, which is expressionistic, but very Art Deco. A Mexico City surgeon finds himself in a love triangle, which brings out the most sadistic and self-destructive gestures – always in love, always with the wrong person.

Film: *La Ausente* is a story about perception vs. reality, guilt and paranoia, with echoes of influences in gothic tales such as those of Edgar Allan Poe. The story is about the unexpected death of the wife of a wealthy landowner in Mexico, and the secrets and suspicions surrounding it. The secret at the heart of the story is how the fatal car accident occurred, and the suspicions are about who might have been responsible for the accident. The power that propels the story forward is that of jealousy, thwarted love, and fear. Finally, there is a shameful secret at the heart of the story – a secret so shameful that a man would risk murder to avoid bringing dishonor to his family. The film was nominated in 1953 for the Grand Priz for the Cannes Film Festival, and was nominated for three separate Ariel Awards: Score, Production Design, and Best Supporting Actress.

Background: La Ausente, like Bracho's widely admired *Crepúsculo*, is a deeply psychological film that uses noir-inflected Expressionistic camera angles, chiaroscuro effects with deep shadows, and visual metaphors, such as the repeated use of a stunning, imposing staircase and a closed-off bedroom where the bed has the appearance of a raised vault within a tomb. The stunning cinematography, which creates a claustrophobic sense of interiority, was done by Alex Phillips, a Canadian, born in 1901, who was invited to be the cinematographer for the first sound film in Mexico in 1931. He was a great success in Mexico, where his work was included in many of the classics of the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema. After first moving there for work, he lived in Mexico until his death in 1977.

PLOT

A Reckless, Defiant Wife is killed Despite her husband, Jorge, imploring her to stay, Isabel backs out of the garage, wheels screeching on the driveway, and drives at a high velocity down the driveway and out of sight. We see her driving down a winding, mountainous terrain with many curves, and the cinematography emphasizes the danger. At the end, we hear a terrible impact as the car crashes into a tree. Isabel is killed. This scene is significant and elements of it are echoed later in the film, in future scenes that recall the reckless driving that leads to her death, and the tree where the impact occurred.



The Funeral Isabel is eulogized as a paragon of womanly virtue, who generously supports philanthropical causes as well as being a devoted mother to Rosita, the daughter that she and Jorge have together. Isabel's mother looks on approvingly. Jorge's face, and the chiaroscuro lighting shows he is a man divided, with an inner torment that cannot be disguised. Later in the film, those same words will be used to extol her virtues, and to emphasize how deeply she was loved by Jorge. However, in each repetition, more doubts are cast, and it is clear that her grip on Jorge and the family continues after her death. The question is, is it from deep love, attachment, or dark secrets that are too shameful to admit?

Jorge's Torment To the world, Jorge is deeply grieved by the loss of his wife. But, as time goes on, there are indications that something else may be tormenting him. All aspects of Isabel trigger a reaction, and he expresses the torment in several ways: He forbids anyone to change anything in her room, and surrounds the bed with sheer curtains. He is angry when Mónica sets out flower arrangements in the same places that Isabel used to set them out. He wants nothing to do with her black evening gown when it is returned from the cleaners' and directs the maid to "give it to anyone who wants it." He snaps at his sister, Cecilia, when she asks him the name of the mechanic he often extols. All photos and portraits of Isabel are taken down. Isabel's voice plays in his head and he hears her speaking to him, although no one is in her seat in the dining room, nor at her dressing table.



Mónica, the nanny Anticipating that she would be leaving her family and her daughter, Isabel contracts a private tutor who will also act as a nanny for Rosita. Mónica Sandoval is a young, attractive teacher who, coincidentally, is an orphan. When she rings the doorbell, a distraught, rather wild-eyed Jorge answers. She does not know that she has interrupted a fugue state or hallucination where he was imagining the ghost of Isabel was speaking to him. When she explains that she was there on behest of Isabel, and she has a letter of presentation, he is shocked. He reads the letter, which explains that Rosita will now need a female caretaker, and Mónica would be perfect for being both a nanny and a teacher. Jorge receives the message badly and mutters, “well get lost!” responding to the letter, and not to Mónica. He apologizes, explaining that his wife died three days before. Mónica hastily apologizes and departs. A few days later, when Rosita starts sleep-walking and almost falls down the staircase, Jorge realizes she should not be alone, and he calls back Mónica so that he can hire her. She agrees, as she has already fallen in love with Jorge (she resonates with his torment). Coincidentally, Rosita instantly adores Mónica and is quite happy with her.

Painful Coincidence Isabel’s elegant black evening gown comes back from the cleaners. Jorge directs the maid to give it away. The maid, thinking it will be a wonderful gift for Mónica and that it will become her, gives it to Mónica, who immediately dons it for a formal dinner with Jorge. Mónica is overwhelmed with gratitude because she believes the gift was an intentional one from Jorge. She is in for a rude awakening when such is not the case. Jorge, standing at the foot of the staircase, looks up to see Mónica beginning to descend. Rivetted in horror, he shouts, “Where did you get that dress? Take it off!” At that, Mónica flies back to her room, flings herself on the bed, and weeps.



At the Tree Where Isabel Died One day, as Monica and Jorge drive together, they pass a tree. Jorge stops and they approach it. He is clearly shaken. Seeing his distress, Mónica attempts to soothe him with reassuring words: "By all accounts, Isabel was a wonderful person and it is natural that you should feel sadness. Perhaps you could place flowers here, as a testament to a great love." Jorge interrupts brusquely, "Stop! That's enough!" Mónica concludes that Jorge is still in love with Isabel. Wounded, she is silent. The next day, she walks into Jorge's office with a packed suitcase, and announces her intentions to leave. Jorge asks her forgiveness. They talk, and Jorge professes his love. He proposes and she accepts.

Magdalena's Threats Magdalena is Isabel's older, less attractive sister, who has moved into the house upon Isabel's death. She happened to overhear the conversation that Jorge had with the mechanic, so she also believes that Jorge is responsible for Isabel's death, having directed her to take his car, which the mechanic deemed so dangerous to drive that it could result in a lethal accident. Magdalena points out that Isabel died with \$100,000 pesos in her purse. She tells Jorge that if he marries Mónica, she'll tell everyone that he killed her. Jorge retorts that she can do so, but she should remember that Samson also died when he toppled the pillars that supported the temple.



ROMANCE

Mónica Finds an Empty Nest One day, while walking in the grounds with Jorge, Mónica comes across an empty nest. She cradles the nest in her hands, and says she will find a tree so that a little family of birds can live happily together in it. Today is a beautiful day, adds Mónica, with the joy that is generated on the first warm, sunny day after a cold, dark winter. Jorge agrees, but adds that it's like the first day back after a long illness. It is life-affirming, but one is weak. It's not enough to sustain a lifetime. He is alluding to the fear that no new love will be enough to overcome the burden of knowing he has a dark secret that he can never share.



Honeymoon in a Tropical Paradise overlooking the Ocean Mónica and Jorge take a plane to a beautiful ocean beach house where they spend days walking along the surf, collecting shells, and sitting in the sand, contemplating the ocean, the ephemeral nature of footsteps in the sand with the incoming tide, and the crashing waves. This is a scene with several very clear and poignant visual metaphors, the first being the crashing ocean, which reflects their intense feelings, and then, the footsteps, which suggest the ephemeral nature of life. Approaching Jorge, Mónica shows him a conch shell she has found, and comments how it is like a heart. But in the shell, you hear infinity. Mónica starts to recite the poem by the Mexican modernist poet, Ramón López Velarde. As she recites her favorite lines in the poem, "Hermana, Hazme Llorar," from the collection, "Fuensanta," it just so happens that it is also a favorite of Jorge, who also knows the words and can recite them.



FAMILY

Honeymoon Rituals The honeymoon scenes continue with powerful visual metaphors as Jorge and Mónica drink a toast to their love and their undying union. Jorge lifts up his glass and hurls it to the floor, where it breaks. “No one can ever drink from the same glass,” he says, in a way that makes one think of the glass as analogous to the body in marriage. Mónica obligingly hurls her glass as well. In the background plays “Bésame Mucho” (Kiss me, kiss me deeply, as though this night were the last time), which interjects a sense of loss and anticipatory nostalgia. The cinematography incorporates expressionism, with the silhouettes of palms in the window shades, and sheer curtains swirling in the breeze. The camera follows their slow dance, and it is a very long cut, with emphasis on the hands clasped and the embrace, while they are cheek to cheek. The final frames of the scene include the broken stems of the glasses which glint in the last light of the sun, which is setting over the horizon in the sea, a flash as it sinks below the line of the ocean.



Dinner with Isabel’s Parents After a day of nerves and dread, the parents of Isabel arrive for a visit in conjunction with the dedication of the new home for the elderly, which will bear Isabel’s name, so that her name (and Jorge’s family’s name) will be forever attached to good works and generosity. They sit for dinner and as they discuss the plans for the next day’s ceremony, Isabel’s parents suggest that Jorge give the speech that Isabel would ordinarily give. Mónica interrupts and suggests that she should give the speech, since, after all, she is Jorge’s wife and now occupies the same place that Isabel did. “That is not possible. You’re not a part of the family,” interposes Isabel’s mother, who simply points out that Mónica is not related to Isabel’s family. Mónica states that she will not attend, and leaves the dinner. The next day, true to her word, Mónica states she will not attend. Instead of wearing black, she is dressed in a polka-dotted summer sun dress, wholly inappropriate for a memorial ceremony and dedication.



SECRETS

Isabel's secret Obdurately refusing to change clothes, attend the dedication, or show any respect at all for Isabel, Mónica meets the entire household at breakfast. Jorge implores her to please wear black out of respect. Isabel leaves the room. Cecilia follows her. As she does so, she also asks Mónica to acquiesce to Jorge's wishes and to not humiliate him. Mónica then proceeds to show Cecilia letters she found in Isabel's desk when she was getting the room ready for guests. They are love letters, and they make it appear that Isabel was preparing to run off with a man named Jaime. Whether or not it was the architect, Jaime, is not clear. Cecilia points out that the letters are undated and could have predated the marriage. Mónica insists on showing Isabel's family the letters, and continuing to wear the polka-dot party dress instead of the black that is appropriate for a remembrance ceremony, and to show respect to a family who has lost their loved one. Cecilia begs Mónica to think of little Rosita and the harm she would be doing if she ruined the reputation of Isabel. Finally, Mónica relents, meets the family and tells Jorge she will attend and she will wear black.

Jorge's secret With Mónica, Magdalena, and Cecilia in the room with him, Jorge spontaneously confesses that he killed Isabel. Jorge turns to Magdalena and tells her that she can stop the extortion. He does not care who knows. Isabel was not the paragon he claimed she was. In fact, she was just the opposite. She was a manipulative, selfish, disloyal gold-digger who only had a child to secure her personal financial status. Isabel was about to leave to meet a lover, and the fact she brought \$100,000 pesos with her, and also arranged for Mónica to take care of Rosita indicated that she had no thought of returning. Such behavior would have been humiliating to the family and to Rosita. Jorge explained that he tricked Isabel into driving his car, which had mechanical problems. He changed his mind and tried to warn her so that she would not go, but she merely mocked him when he begged her to stay. Thus, he was responsible for her death, he stated. "Mónica, I am a killer and I do not deserve love." Mónica demurs and declares her undying love for him. Magdalena states tearfully that she was always the older, uglier sister and she loved Jorge, but her younger, cuter sister seduced him. Bit by bit, jealousy caused her love to sour into hate. "Jorge, forgive me for loving you too much." Jorge does not respond.



Auto Mechanic's info The doorbell rings and Cecilia answers it. It is an auto mechanic who worked on Jorge's car that was driven by Isabel. The car was not running well, so she stopped at a shop to have it repaired. While the mechanics worked on the car, Isabel stopped at a nearby bar and became extremely inebriated. When she left, she could hardly walk. Clearly, she had an accident because of driving drunk. So, she was not killed by the faulty brakeline or other mechanical issues. There is joy all around, except for Magdalena. Cecilia slips Mónica the letters from Isabel.



The Final Burn In the final scene, Mónica and Jorge are standing in front of a fireplace with a fire on the hearth. They embrace and kiss, with a burning intensity that is palpable on the screen. Surreptitiously, Mónica pulls the letters from her pocket and drops them into the fire.



THEMES

RELATIONSHIP (Marriage)

Marriage One of the major dramatic tensions in *La Ausente* centers on the issue of marriage; namely, the idea that the marriage between Jorge and Isabel was ideal and that they were a perfect match in every way, and perfectly happy with each other. It is, at least, what Monica thinks, and she is riddled with jealousy and allows her suspicions to negatively impact her relationship with Jorge. She implores him to tell her why he always has a distant look, and how she assumes it is because he is longing for the past. He is angry when she brings up the subject, which only confirms her own bias. Isabel's family also considers the marriage between Jorge and Isabel to be ideal – not because they are happy, or even that Isabel is a good woman, but that it satisfies their notion of caste and hierarchy, and a marriage with Jorge cements Isabel's place in the elite. This sense of social hierarchy also rankles Monica because she has no idea what social stratum she was born into – and even if she were the offspring of an elite, the fact that she lacked the upbringing in that hothouse environment makes her feel unworthy and inadequate. When the truth comes out, that the marriage was actually about to end, and that Isabel was a taunting, cruel adulteress, and not the paragon of virtue Jorge wanted the world to think, Monica realizes that her marriage to Jorge is actually the ideal one.

PSYCHOLOGY (Paranoia, Guilt)

Paranoia As *La Ausente* is largely a psychological drama, it is not surprising that the main themes involve psychological ones, as well as those having to do with reality vs. illusion, which would fall largely under the umbrella of "Appearance."

Jorge exhibits a great deal of paranoia, which contributes to his moodiness and his entering into delusions or even psychosis marked by hallucinations. His paranoia has primarily two origins: first, the fact that he is heavily invested in an honor culture mindset, where the family name is all-important, and one must preserve the dignity and reputation of members above all. To besmirch the name of his family and its future generations is a capital offense; to wit, his justification for creating the situation that would lead to a fatal car accident. Further, his need to preserve the family honor leads him to persuade the world that his wife is a saintly paragon of virtue and grace. Needless to say, she is not. The second source of his paranoia is his sense of guilt and horror at the fact that he caused his wife to take a dangerous, defective car on narrow, curving highways.

Mónica also suffers from paranoia. Her paranoia stems from jealousy and a deep sense of inadequacy, given she is an orphan and does not have the grand family name and traditions that Jorge's family enjoys. Her existential condition of "orphan" implies isolation and even if she has a name, it is a "no-name," leading her to think of herself as having no self. The self she has is provisional; it is based on her role as a teacher or nanny to young children, or later, built on the love Jorge has for her. One can argue that the time she felt the most complete was during the honeymoon at the beach house, where there was no jealousy stemming from the presence of "the absent one" (Isabel) in the family home.

Guilt Jorge believes that he is responsible for the death of his wife because he suggested that she take his car, rather than her own. He prevaricated and made her think that Jorge's car was safe, and hers was mechanically unfit for travel, when just the reverse was true. He believes himself to be a murderer for his mischief, his dirty trick. Little does he know that in reality, Isabel stopped at a auto mechanic's shop for repairs. While she waited on the repairs, she became intoxicated, and driving while impaired by alcohol and extreme emotions caused her to have the fatal accident. When Jorge finds out about the truth, he is relieved. The film maintains a sense of indeterminacy and ambiguity regarding Jorge's guilt of intentions. The truth was that he did plot to kill his wife. The fact he is guilty in intention (even if not in the actual act of killing), is part of the "noir" element of the film, and makes him a deeply flawed protagonist, even if somewhat sympathetic. Another part of the "noir" chemistry occurs when Jorge tells Monica that he is a murderer, and that confession does not phase her at all – if anything it made her even more intensely devoted to him; after all, he killed her rival – something she also had desires (not realized of

course) to do. The fact that they share murderous desires unites them in a way far beyond their ostensible affinity for each other because each feels solitude and aloneness in the world (*saudade*).

FLAWS (Pride)

Pride What led Jorge to a point of rage that caused him to have homicidal impulses, and then to justify his homicidally-intended acts was a deep psychological investment in “honor culture,” and to let it skew his thinking so that he felt his honor must be defended at all costs, and by extension, that of his family. Another way of looking at honor is pride – a belief that he occupied a position innately superior than others, and also that a wife’s duplicity would shame him.

The flaw of pride is not displayed as overweening pride, but from a point of view of trying to build himself back up to the state of overweening pride that he had before Isabel’s betrayals. The fact that he invents a completely false narrative regarding Isabel, which makes her on the level of a saint, rather than a materialistic and cruelly rejecting woman, is a manifestation of the flaw of pride.

The *mise-en-scene* of *La Ausente* emphasizes the fact that Jorge and his family belong to the elites, and their impeccable sense of dress and decorum reinforce that aspect. The assault to his pride is visually represented by the dress Mónica chooses to wear to the somber, potentially even lugubrious dedication of the home for the elderly, named after Isabel. Instead of a black outfit consisting of a straight black skirt and black jacket, Mónica chooses to wear a full-skirted, sleeveless, polka-dot party dress. The dress is intended to mock the occasion and to show disrespect to the memory of Isabel. Jorge takes it as a personal affront, since his wife is expected to be an extension of himself. Thus, there are many ways that the wife can make nicks and cuts into the sense of pride, making pride a flaw instead of a powerful type of self-respect.

Magdalena and Mónica also suffer from the flaw of pride, but their takes a different form than Jorge. They have pride of power or agency, made all the more acute by the fact that they do not have any direct power in their masculinist society, and as the envious ugly sister of the wife of the man she obsessively loves, or the social status-less orphan who is convinced her husband still devotedly adores his now-deceased wife. They are haughty and proud when they think they have a modicum of power and status (all provisional and contingent on the man’s lending them any power in the first place). Their pride exhibits itself in interactions with each other, and when Magdalena threatens Jorge with exposure, and continues the extortion as long as she can. She gains power through extortion, but the minute he refuses to feel fear of her exposure (he ignores his own pride), she loses her power.

APPEARANCE (Secrets)

Secrets There are tremendous secrets within the household. The first secret we are privy to is the fact that Jorge plotted his wife’s death and deliberately inveigled Isabel into taking his car, rather than her own, as she left for a weekend trip, ostensibly “with women friends.”

The second secret has to do with Isabel’s true character, which was, as Jorge describes late in the film, as manipulative, mercenary, immoral, and devoid of maternal instincts. The fact that she is leaving for a rendezvous with a lover rather than a weekend getaway with women friends is something he views as both shameful and corrosive to any notion of family honor.

More secrets are held by Isabel herself. She keeps a small cache of love letters from a “Jaime” in her desk. They are undated, and when Mónica discovers them, she is convinced that they were contemporaneous with Isabel’s abandonment. However, they are not dated, and simply show that Isabel had more than one amorous conquest.

The house itself is a place of secrets, and is filled with hidden spaces and shadowy negative space. Each dark shadow or negative space (a blank space on a wall where once hung a photo) represents a secret, which is to say, a place of infinite possibility. The shadows and negative spaces are the generative spaces within this psychological narrative which explores the nature of how one brings a thing into being.

The reification process (bringing things into being) and its relationship to deeper psychological states is made manifestly clear in *La Ausente*. Where there are shadows or blank spaces, Mónica quickly spins it into a ghost presence of the departed Isabel, and the more she looks into the blanks and imagines what might or should there, the more she conjures the presence to the point it affects Mónica's perceptions and her behaviors.



CHARACTERS

MONICA (Open, Sensitive, *Curious, Adventurous, Loyal, Helpful, Responsible, Orderly, Determined,*)

Monica is a lovely young woman who has training and experience as an educator, specializing in early childhood education. She works as a private tutor, but in the case of Rosita, she is also more or less her nanny. As an orphan, Monica is very sensitive to the unique pain of the child who is all alone in the world, particularly since she has not overcome the trauma of her own childhood and has internalized what she considers to be the stigma of aloneness.

Sensitive: Mónica is a woman who listens to the people around her, with the goal of finding a connection to a sympathetic human being. While this might seem rather pedestrian, for Mónica, such a focus is a profound reflection of who she is; a woman with a broken wing, still bearing the scars of her childhood marked by feelings of abandonment, grief, and loss due being an orphan

Curious: Mónica wants to know everything she can about the mysterious Isabel, and when she has a chance, she asks questions and probes. One example is the scene in which Mónica finds love letters from Isabel to a "Jaime" and she rifles through Isabel's old secretary desk, looking for more.

Adventurous: When Mónica is treated badly by Jorge in their first encounter, she leaves quietly. When he calls her back to work as Rosita's nanny and tutor, she demonstrates a bit of courage and even adventure as she is open to a new experience that is not without its risk.

Loyal: Mónica is loyal to Jorge, although she starts to become convinced that he is still in love with the deceased Isabel.

Helpful: As an orphan, Mónica identifies with little Rosita and wants to do everything in her power to shelter her and show her unconditional love. When asked why she endured the conditions in the house (with Magdalena) and Jorge's inconsistent treatment of her, she explained that she did it all for little Rosita.

Responsible: An experienced teacher, Mónica recognizes both the cognitive and emotional needs of Rosita and she does everything in her power to be a reliable, predictable, and responsible tutor and nanny. She is so effective that Isabel's parents tell her at their dinner together that they assumed Jorge married Mónica simply to care for Rosita and to be her "second mother."

Orderly: Not only is she neat and orderly with respect to her personal appearance, Mónica also makes sure to discipline herself and behave with decorum. That said, she starts to become suspicious and paranoid about Isabel, to the point that Isabel represents a disordering force in her life and mind.

Determined: Once the lattice bonds of rationality have been breached, obsessive, disordering thoughts of Isabel are able to penetrate and they destabilize Mónica. Her thoughts become disordered and chaotic, and she clearly starts to suffer from an obsession with Isabel and the desire to extirpate her presence from the home.

Insecure: The grand gulf that exists between Jorge and herself distresses Mónica because she knows that there is something dark and dangerous that is being concealed from her. Instead of assuming that Isabel was not what she was publicly portrayed to be, Mónica assumes that Jorge is still in love with the phantom Isabel, to the point that he does not want to be questioned about it. In fact, he snaps at Mónica when she brings up the subject.

Anxious: The more time that goes on with the unresolved mystery of Jorge's response to mentions of Isabel's death, the more nervous, suspicious, defensive and anxious Monica becomes. She is on a rollercoaster of emotions – extremely happy with Jorge during their beautiful beach honeymoon, but anxious, nervous and sad when he grows silent, pensive, and she sees the "great gulf" in his eyes, and he emotionally absents himself even as they are together.

MAGDALENA (*Closed, Insensitive, Suspicious, Unfriendly, Controlled, Schemer, Paranoid, Moody, Angry*)

Magdalena is Isabel's sister. Instead of having a loving relationship with her sibling, Magdalena is riddled with jealousy because she perceives her sister as being favored by everyone for being charismatic and beautiful, while Magdalena is an old toad in comparison. Before Isabel met Jorge, Magdalena was deeply infatuated with him. However, that supposed love turned to hatred when Isabel met Jorge, and Jorge clearly preferred Isabel, eventually marrying her.

Insensitive: As a jealous sister, Magdalena takes gratification at the ability to pry into the lives of Jorge and Isabel. So, when she picks up the phone and overhears the conversation in which the mechanic tells Jorge to, under no circumstances, drive his car because it "will kill him," she corrected deduces that Jorge actively sought to create the circumstances that would result in a fatal accident for his wife, who was on the path to run off with a lover and humiliate him, his family, and their daughter. Instead of being sensitive to the situation and using the information for justice, she leverages the information in order to control Jorge's actions. Her extortion finally reaches a point where Jorge no longer cares who knows – again, an indication of how insensitive she is to people's feelings or responses.

Suspicious: Resentful toward Jorge because he jilted her, preferring her sister to her, Magdalena is suspicious of any interloper. When Mónica comes to live in the house as Rosita's tutor and nanny, Magdalena is instantly suspicious of her motives. When Jorge announces his intentions to marry Mónica, Magdalena's suspicions are confirmed.

Unfriendly: Magdalena is extremely unfriendly toward Mónica, and attempts to undermine all of her efforts to be a good tutor and nanny for Rosita. For example, when Mónica asks the cooks why Rosita was not

given the special nutrition drink that she prepared for Rosita, the cooks inform that Magdalena prohibited them from serving Rosita anything not directed by herself, Magdalena. Never apologizing for her hostility, Magdalena continues to block Mónica and her authority.

Controlled: Magdalena craves being the mistress of the de la Cueva household, and she takes it very seriously. She controls the key to Isabel's room, which is preserved as she left it, and she gives orders to the house staff including the cooks and the maids.

Planner (Schemer): When Magdalena accidentally overhears the conversation revealing Jorge's scheme to trick Isabel into driving the car his mechanic said "would kill him" as she abandons the marriage to run off with a lover, Magdalena immediately assumes that Jorge's plan worked and that he was responsible for her death in the car accident. She uses the information to blackmail Jorge. What she does not realize (and neither does Jorge), is that Isabel takes the car to a mechanic and has it repaired. She was in an accident, to be sure, but it was due to her driving while under the influence of alcohol.

Paranoid: Ordinarily having an imaginative approach to life would see like a positive thing. However, Magdalena's imagination jumps to negative conclusion, probably because, as she explains, her love for Jorge slowly converted to a deep hatred because he preferred her prettier, more magnetic sister, Isabel, to her.

Moody: Like Jorge, Magdalena suffers from an inner torment. However, her inner turmoil has nothing to do with feelings of guilt and damaged honor. While it does have to do with pride, her own mind also tortures her with the idea that she cannot measure up to her sister, and then later, to Mónica, as she seeks to win Jorge's heart. Such negative thoughts make her irascible and truculent, impossible to be around.

Angry: Driven by thoughts that tell her that she is ugly, unlovable, and unwanted, Magdalena is in a constant state of seething anger. There are few scenes that do not demonstrate the anger; perhaps the only one that shows a softer side of Magdalena is in the end, when Jorge is absolved by the mechanic who states that the car was perfectly safe to drive after he repaired it. Magdalena expresses deep regret as she adjures Jorge to "please remember that I always loved you."

JORGE: (*Closed, Moody, Hard-working, Moody*)

Jorge de la Cueva is the tormented protagonist of the film. A member of the elite, he believes in preserving family honor above all. So, to marry a woman who might besmirch their social standing and good name would be meritorious of the harshest opprobrium. When Isabel taunts him with the claim she will spend a weekend with her girlfriends when he knows she is planning to carouse publicly with a lover she has had on the side, his thoughts turn murderous.

Closed From an "Big Five" psychological traits perspective, Jorge is moderately closed to new experiences. He is eager to control his environment in order to make sure that no one ever suspects that his wife was not the exalted person he purports her to be. Further, he wants to control who knows about that fateful decision to drive his car, and thus he plays into Magdalena's clutches.

Moody Because he is so tormented by guilt and also anger about Isabel's treatment of him, Jorge is often moody and can easily lose his patience. He is also insistent in receiving respect, not only for himself but for all members of his family. This, too, adds to his inner tension, making him low in terms of agreeableness.

Hard working In the Big Five, this is conscientiousness, and Jorge is, by all appearances, conscientious and hard-working. He is a responsible parent to Rosita, and he follows through on the decision to construct a charity home for the elderly, and also to name it after his wife. He is determined to keep the family name pristine and admirable, and so he behaves with the utmost cordiality to Isabel's parents. He is very controlled, particularly in his dealings with Magdalena and her extortion.

Moody In the Big Five, “moody and anxious” correspond with Neuroticism, and Jorge is very high, perhaps almost off the charts, in neuroticism. His moods shift in line with his dark, brooding, paranoid thoughts, and he is hypervigilant, worried that people will guess how Isabel was really behaving. Jorge values the appearance of things, and he goes to great lengths to hide or conceal his inner torment. Mónica, an orphan well acquainted with deep emotional pain, detects the presence of grief and sadness, and it draws her to him from the minute they meet. They are kindred spirits, both with tendencies toward dark thoughts, but they offer each other solace. It is the foundation of their joy together and their deep love.

VISUAL METAPHORS IN JULIO BRACHO’S LA AUSENTE

Julio Bracho launched his career in theatre where he was a part of an avant-garde, modernist group that incorporated many of the modernist design ideas from painting and sculpture, as well as techniques inspired by German Expressionism.

Bracho’s repetitions of visual images create a series of visual metaphors that reinforce the narrative and provide insight into the emotional and existential conditions of the characters. In *La Ausente*, what is not seen is as important as what is seen, particularly as it relates to the persona of Isabel, who dies within the first minutes of the film.

Absent Space and “The Absent”: The Presence that Permeates All

We never see Isabel. There is no visual trace of her in any frames of the scene: no paintings, no photos, no flashbacks featuring her appearance. However, her presence is so palpable that it often appears that she has returned as a ghost or that she is, in fact, capable of a kind of demonic possession of their minds.

Bracho creates a presence so strong that she is, in essence, the main character of the story, although she is never seen. It starts as we see a car back out of a detached garage and drive recklessly down a winding road. Her interactions are with her husband, Jorge, who repents too late for tricking her into driving his dangerously defective car.

When Jorge learns of Isabel’s death in a car accident, the “absent” is not absent at all, except in body. He is tormented by her actions – being manipulative, selfish, and unfaithful, not only because of his own sense of offended male honor, but also due to the potential stains on the honor of the family. Bracho creates the presence by showing them in conversations with each other, and yet where Isabel would be is an empty chair, an empty room, an empty doorway. The scenes suggest that Isabel is potentially a ghost or the construction of a mind that is losing its grip on reality and sliding into insanity.

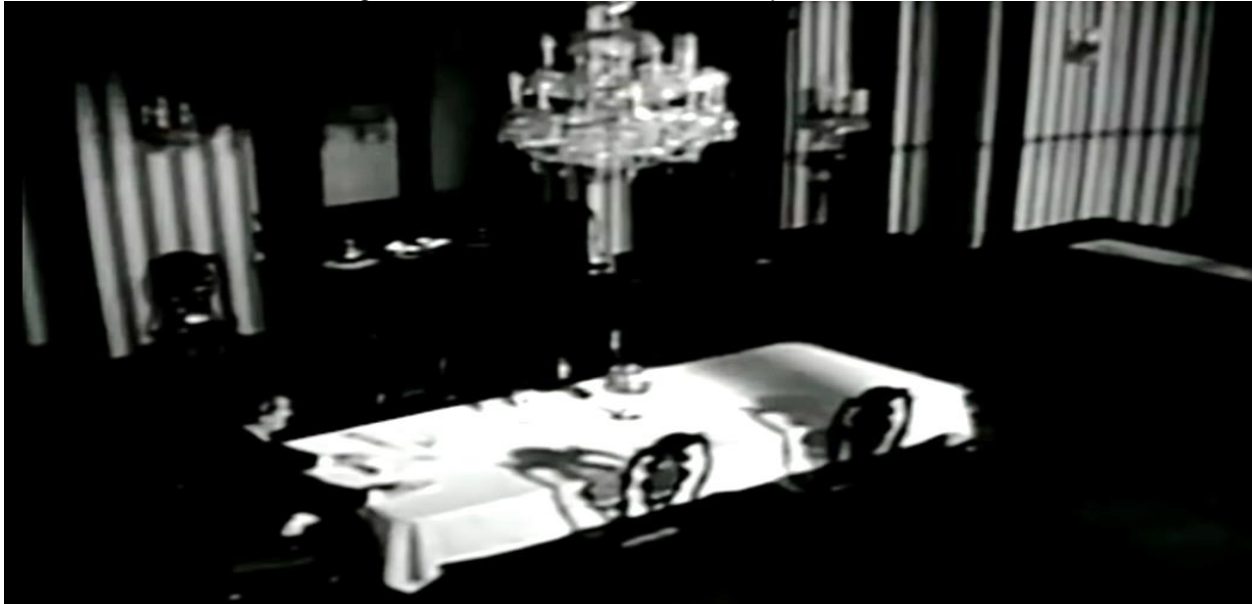
Paradoxically, in order to avoid shame and humiliation, Jorge constructs an alternative Isabel that occupies the absent space. This alternative Isabel, although not visible, is represented as possessing beauty, grace, philanthropical generosity, deep maternal instincts, and filial piety, when in reality, she was abandoning her child to run off with a lover, and the \$100,000 pesos was not intended for charity, but for selfish aims.

The idea of possession is suggested in several scenes, perhaps most notably in the scene where Isabel’s black evening gown returns from the dry cleaners, an empty shell without her body, but nonetheless a powerful “blank space” or “absent space” that suggests her ongoing presence, that becomes almost a living body as Mónica dons the dress. Rather than being possessed by the spirit of Isabel to turn in to a zombie-like presence, obeying the will of a dead woman, Mónica becomes jealous, resentful and suspicious of the dead woman, and wants to do what she can to combat the remaining influence. The more she struggles, the more the sense of dark secrets and inconsolable pain pervade the home. Mónica attempts to assume the “lady of the house” position. However, when Mónica sits in the positions of power that Isabel once occupied, Isabel’s presence is emphasized as nothing could possibly measure up to the larger-than-life mythological presence that Jorge has created.

More than any, Magdalena embodies the absent Isabel. Magdalena uses her knowledge of the overheard conversation between Jorge and the mechanic to play the part of Isabel and dominate the household.

After Jorge and Mónica are married, she usurps Mónica's position as the lady of the house, and the one who runs household affairs. Magdalena controls the key to Isabel's room and she orders flowers, arranges menus, and undermines Mónica's authority at every turn.

Other scenes where the "absent" Isabel is powerfully present include the scenes where Jorge hears her voice and yet there is no one in the room and in her bedroom that has been sealed off and preserved exactly as she left it, the platform bed suggesting a Catholic wake where the body would be available for viewing. When Jorge and Mónica visit the place where she died, the presence is powerful, and acts as a wedge between Mónica and Jorge. Other scenes occur in the house, as Isabel's presence is an unseen hand directing flowers to be placed in areas, Rosita to be garbed in deep mourning, and the stairway that ascends to her bedroom to begin to resemble staircases in a temple or mausoleum.



Chiaroscuro: Light as Psychological Fragmentation and Darkness as Secrets

Julio Bracho's use of the interplay of light and dark constitutes a variation on the typical way that chiaroscuro functions in German Expressionism or film noir. Jorge's torment due to his blend of guilt, honor, shame, grief, and desire is emphasized by lighting that puts his face in the light, but his body in shadows. At the most extreme times of inner turmoil, his body and face are cast in variegated shadows and light, suggesting fragmentation and a disintegration of self and psyche.

Similarly, shadow engulfs Mónica's body when she finds herself losing her battle to fight Isabel's presence. She does not know that Jorge does not love Isabel, but in fact, loathes her memory. Instead, Mónica is convinced that Jorge is in love with her and is obsessed with the ghost of Isabel. In this case, the use of chiaroscuro and the shadowing of Mónica represents an ontological extinction of Mónica's being, in favor of that of the dead Isabel.

In contrast, in scenes with little Rosita, light shines and engulfs the scene with a sense of life, integrity, and wholesomeness. For example, when Jorge reads a book to Rosita, a light glows over and seems to emanate out from them. This is a stark contrast with the dark ruminations of Jorge, who is convinced he is guilty of the death of Isabel, and has justified it in the name of honor and maintaining a front for the family ("remember who we are!" he says to Mónica, and he names an entire charitable home for the elderly after the supposedly virtuous Isabel).



Staircase Scenes: A Reminder There Is an Upper and a Lower Realm

In a rather infernal inversion of the customary order of things, the grand staircase that forms the central focal point in all of the interior scenes, does not necessarily signify an ascent to higher realms, or a transcendent union where knowledge is possible. Instead, what the staircase ascends to is not heaven, but to the bedrooms and living quarters of the living and the “absent.” Instead of a heavenly realm, there is Isabel’s living space, sealed up as a tomb or a crypt. Further creating the impression of a crypt or a tomb is her platform bed. Although her body is not on it, it reminds one of the crypts in medieval castles of Europe that contain an effigy or likeness of the deceased atop the tomb. Sheer curtains reinforce the idea of death, as they fall from the ceiling like hanging shrouds.

Upstairs is a place of nightmare, terror, jealousy, and psychological extinction as Jorge battles the demons of guilt and obsessive honor, and Mónica battles the scars of loss (she is an orphan), and the demon of jealousy that opens the portals of psychological extinction as she feels herself defeated and then subsumed by the presence of Isabel, whom she believes to be superior to her in class, social standing, beauty, and virtue. Of course, this is not actually the case, and so it is really the operation of Mónica’s own imagination that gives the concept of Isabel so much power over her own sense of self.

When Jorge stands at the foot of the stairs and looks up to see what he imagines to be a Mónica transmogrified into Isabel, and thus into an infernal mocking, taunting reminder of what he did to Isabel, he is stunned and horrified. Likewise shocked is Mónica. The staircase also functions as a conduit of communication; even more so, it is a conduit of illusion.

In an example of how the staircase functions to telegraph messages through visual triggers, when Mónica comes down the staircase dressed in a polka-dot party dress to attend a somber naming ceremony for the home for the elderly, she communicates defiance and deliberate disrespect to Isabel and her family. Conversely, when she stands at the base of the staircase and announces her intention to ascend to her room and change into a black dress, she communicates conciliation and rapprochement.



GUIDING QUESTIONS:

1. Describe a situation in which appearances deceive and Monica jumps to the wrong conclusion about Isabel. How does Jorge orchestrate the appearance, and how does it ultimately add to his inner torment?
2. Chiaroscuro is the use of light and shadows to draw emphasis to a concept or an aspect of a person or a scene. Caravaggio took chiaroscuro to the extreme in order to express scenes of great anguish and inner torment. Select three scenes in *La Ausente* that use the play of light and dark to suggest a character's innermost feelings.
3. Most of *La Ausente* takes place inside. The interior spaces of Jorge de la Cueva's home and also of the beach house are filmed in a way that give insights into the characters' states of mind and inner landscape. Please choose three scenes and describe how the interior space reflects the character's state of mind at the moment.
4. Magdalena tells Jorge that, over time, her obsessive love turned to obsessive hate. What happened? What made her change her attitude toward Jorge? In doing so, describe how the kind of love that she describes is more akin to possession than the kind of love that lovers normally have.
5. What is the foundation of the bond between Jorge and Monica, and how is it that they fell deeply in love with each other, even though they were concealing facts and feelings from each other? How is being an orphan similar to being born into a family where appearances must be maintained at all times, and if your wife is disloyal, mercenary, and mocking, you still have to pretend she is an angel?