

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Susan Smith Nash, Ph.D.

MACLOVIA (1948)

Emilio Fernández (Mexico)

Link to the film: <https://youtu.be/ONene2xEQrQ>

Genre: Romantic Drama

OVERVIEW

Maclovia is a stunningly photographed story of the people who live in Janitzio, an island in the large lake Pátzcuaro, in central Mexico. Janitzio is a cultural time capsule, where indigenous traditions are preserved by the people who refuse to let people in the community travel to the outside world for fear of losing their traditions. For all the beauty and simplicity of this cult-like bubble world, there are problems when two people, the beautiful Maclovia and her impoverished suitor, José María, are not allowed to marry due to his inability to support a family. There are further problems due to a jealous rival and a usurious shopkeeper who makes it difficult for the indigenous to prosper. When the Mexican Army decides to use the island as a temporary outpost, a crisis occurs when the lecherous and disrespectful Sargent García decides he will abduct the beautiful Maclovia, claiming to her father that he would like to marry her. *Maclovia* exposes the generations of humiliation of the indigenous by the conquering Europeans and demonstrates that all strategies to preserve themselves and to maintain an isolated, protected existence ultimately fail, partially because the defense techniques themselves become barbaric and cruel.

PRIMARY CHARACTERS

Maclovia	Daughter of village head, in love with José María
José María	Poor fisherman, in love with Maclovia
Tata Macrario	Maclovia's father, village head
Don Justo	Village teacher
Sargento Genovevo de la Garza	Sergeant in the Mexican army
Sara	Young woman, also in love with José María
Don Jerónimo, priest	Parish priest

SYNOPSIS

Maclovia and José María are in love, but due to his lack of material resources, Maclovia's father, the mayor, refuses to permit them to marry. Maclovia is a dutiful daughter and would not dream of disobeying her father or going against the traditions that have been so assiduously maintained in this indigenous community located on an island from which no one can leave, under pain of death. For the love of Maclovia, José María learns to read and attempts to better his financial situation, much to the admiration of the local schoolteacher, Don Justo. Disaster strikes when the Mexican army moves to the island to set up an encampment led by Sargento García, a cruel, lecherous man who has no respect for indigenous people. García targets Maclovia, even though he has been told that the women of the island are for the men of the island, and any woman suspected of consorting with an outsider would be stoned to death. He pursues Maclovia, and is then defended by José María. In the meantime, Maclovia's father comes to support the marriage between his only daughter and José María, knowing that she is in grave danger from Sargento García. Things come to a crisis point when García physically chases Maclovia and shoots José María, who tries to save her. He persists and they struggle, García drowning as he tries to kill José María. José María is arrested by eventually cleared. But, the jealous Sara makes mischief and tells the townspeople that José María and Maclovia are planning to leave the island. In a mob frenzy, they light

torches and hunt them down to stone them to death. The Adjutant of the Mexican Army, who is also indigenous, uses force to stop the stoning, thus allowing José María and Maclovía to take their boat across the lake, toward the rising sun and a beautiful future.

STORY

ISLAND The events take place in an island in a lake in the Mexican highlands. It is a fishing village and the indigenous people who live there have maintained their traditions and have vowed to never leave the island. The sweeping panorama shows the extent of the lake and the backdrop of mountains and valleys. The villagers have maintained their traditions and live separated from the outside world. The stunning photography by Gabriel Figueroa gives the location a heavenly glow as the high contrast between the illuminated clouds and the sky contribute to a sense of exaltation. Much of the action takes place under the fishing nets that are spread out each day to dry and to be mended. On the lake, José María continues the centuries-old tradition of fishing the lake with nets. Water droplets glisten like diamonds in the sun.



LOVERS Maclovía and the poor fisherman José María are in love with each other and would like to get married. Tata Macrario, the town's mayor, refuses to allow Maclovía and José María to marry, even going as far as to say that José María cannot even look upon her. Maclovía, who must be obedient as is the tradition of her culture, cannot complain. Maclovía is a dutiful daughter and obeys her father despite the fact that to be unable to wed José María deeply distresses her.



OUTSIDERS The cruel and arrogant Sargento García arrives looks on with disdain as the governor announces that the army will be stationed in the town for a period of time. Sargento García arrives with his troops to take up quarters on the island. He has no respect whatsoever for indigenous people, and speaks of them in despective, derogatory terms. Don Justo explains the customs of the community to the Lieutenant. He urges him to communicate to the soldiers that the women of the community are exclusively for the men of the community and if any other man from outside has contact with a woman, or if the woman plans to marry an outsider, she will be stoned to death. Corporal who reports to that the Sargento has behaved badly (in Pátzcuaro), and It is likely there will be trouble here.



SCHOOL In the one-room schoolhouse where all students sit on the floor and learn to read, write, work math problems, and study geography, history, and science, the illiterate José María explains that he would like to learn to read and write. Don Justo is impressed with his sincere desire to learn. Seated at the back of the class, José María towers over his young school companions. They generously accept his presence and soon José María distinguishes himself for his dedication and hard work. Don Justo give an impassioned history lesson in which he defends the indigenous people and decries the injustice that has kept them poor, abused, and subjugated to the invaders from Spain. Don Justo solemnly announces that first place in the class goes to two students, both who have worked very hard and have distinguished themselves for the excellent performance. One of the two is José María, who, within four months, has learned to read and write.



ASSAULT Sargento García corners Maclovia and traps her behind a fence. Maclovia is terrified. In the meantime, José María runs to her rescue. Sargento García shoots José María claiming self-defense, and also shoots holes into his new dugout canoe used for fishing. Riddled with bullets, the new dugout canoe sinks to the bottom of the lake. Maclovia flings herself on the fallen José María, who has been shot by Sargento García. Sargento García drunkenly prepares to go after Maclovia and to arrange to have José María executed for having supposedly attacked an officer in the Mexican Army. When his adjutant tells him that he should not do such a thing, Sargento García brutally strikes him. Later, Sargento García is killed as he attempts to abduct Maclovia and to kill José María. Maclovia visits José María in jail to bring him the letter. After delivering the letter, she leaves. Despairing, José María sits on the ground in his jail cell. Sargento García died in the lake as José María struggled to get away and protect Maclovia.



TRADITION OF PUNISHMENT At night, the cemetery is a sea of flickering candles, each one on a grave. The angry mob of villagers heads to the jail and to Maclovia intent on stoning both of them for their relationship with outsiders and for potentially planning to leave the island. The mob throws stones at Maclovia and José María. The stones hit them on the body, head, and face, inflicting injuries.



LOVERS LEAVE THE ISLAND The Adjutant orders the troops to fire in the air and to assert their authority. The Adjutant, who is also indigenous, tells the townspeople to stop the brutal custom and to allow Maclovía and José María to leave the island. José María and Maclovía hold each other after the pelting with rocks stops. José María's face is bleeding. The villagers leave. Illuminated by the sun, the two paddle to their new future together.



THEMES

Love: José María and Maclovía are in love with each other, and their love is capable of withstanding any impediment or barrier. Tata Macrario loves his only daughter and wants to protect her. Don Justo has a deep and abiding love for his students and the community at large. There is also the love that the community and the indigenous Purépechas have for their beliefs and traditions. Sargento García “loves” Maclovía, but it is lust, not love. In fact, Sargento García has such reprehensible qualities that it is doubtful that he is even capable of wholesome, sincere love. Each of these types of love forms a part of the plot and also of the film itself, which is shot in such a way as to engender in the viewer an appreciation for the beauty of Pátzcuaro and the island of Jinitzio, with its characteristic “butterfly” fishing nets and the beautiful artisan items – embroidery, pottery, hand-tatted lace, woven belts and rebozos, hand-carved items in the local church, the butterfly-shaped fishing nets, and more. Love is what binds the community together, and it is what makes José María capable of overcoming a natural reticence in order to learn to read and write. When José María, Maclovía, and Tata Macrario overcome the challenges that created by the community traditions (the man must have a boat and a business), and by the rapacious and lascivious Sargento García, the film conveys a message that love is powerful and that it could even be an antidote to systemic racism.

Abuse of Power: Power and agency differentials characterize the film. The first is exhibited by the patriarchal control that Maclovía's father has over her and in fact over the town. As the head or “cacique” (mayor / chief) of the town, he has more influence than others, and is able to maintain authority. Other sources of power in the town are the priest, who carries a great deal of weight in the community as well as the Catholic Church, and then Don Justo, the kindly schoolmaster who enforces discipline in the classroom and also rewards effort and positive attitudes. The most pronounced power differential is, by far, the difference of power between the Mexican government (and the army) and the indigenous people. Although there is some talk about how all citizens of Mexico are “brethren,” this is not an attitude that is shared by all. In particular, Sargento García treats the Purépecha people with cruelty, condescension, and a kind of gluttonous appetite for anything he sees that pleases him. He behaves as though anything he wants can and should be his. This attitude is, unfortunately, one that was passed down over time, and his rank gives him the belief that he can simply take anything he wants. When he enters Tata Macrario's home, García sits down, leans back in the chair, and puts his feet up on the furniture in a disgusting attitude of ownership. He then tells Tata Macrario that the house is pretty, and that he had always thought

it would be nice to have one – implying that if he wants, he can simply snatch ownership away from Tata Macrario. García abuses his power with respect to Maclovia, and he also abuses his power with José María when he walks to his expensive new boat and pumps it full of bullets, causing it to sink.

Role of Women: Purépecha women have circumscribed roles within their culture, which is evidenced by both Maclovia and Sara. The women support the men – they help carry their supplies to the boats, and they wash the clothes together as they kneel on the rocks on the side of the lake, and they talk to each other. They must obey the paterfamilias, and thus, the male head of the household is the ultimate word and authority. When Tata Macrario forbids Maclovia to even look at José María, she must obey. To go against the traditions and rules for conduct could have very serious consequences – even death.

Racism: Since the arrival of the Europeans in what is now Mexico, and the subsequent colonization, the Indians have been subject not only to physical extermination, but a subjugation connected with a loss of position in society. They are now the underclass and the “other,” and from the Purépecha’s view, the only defense is isolation. The Purépecha Indians who live in Jinitzio in the middle of Lake Pátzcuaro in Michoacan have preserved their distinctive culture and lifestyle by isolating themselves in the island and blocking the departure of anyone. They expressly forbid that a person leave. If they try, or even express an intent to leave, their traditions maintain that they must be condemned to be stoned to death. The traditions seem harsh, but they are trying to protect themselves from the dominant class that controls resources and access to education, wealth, and the tools of survival. The fact that the Purépecha are considered less than human is clearly revealed by the behavior of Sargento García. Their oppression is remarked upon by the schoolmaster, Don Justo, who does his best to restore human dignity to the Purépecha Indians.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

José María: An impoverished, illiterate, but essentially good, loyal, and kind Purépecha man who lives on the isolated island of Janitzio. He is in love with the only daughter of the head of the town, Tata Macrario.

Determined: José María is determined to do what he can to marry Maclovia, and will not be dissuaded, even when faced with the fact that he is forbidden from even looking at her, and that he cannot be considered until he owns a fishing boat, nets, and a way to earn a living. José María is determined to make a living, and does what he can to buy a boat and to earn a living. When José María shows up in Don Justo’s classroom, asking to learn to read and write, he tackles the task with such zeal and dedication that he is one of the top students in little over four months.

Devoted: José María’s devotion is demonstrated in several scenes where it is clear that he is following Maclovia and determined to protect her. For example, when Sargento García chases Maclovia with the intent of putting her in a compromising situation, José María pursues him, even at great risk to himself. Later, even after García has shot José María in the shoulder, José María continues to defend Maclovia. When he is jailed for the death of García (who drowned as he was trying to drown José María), José María never wavers in being willing to sacrifice himself for her love and safety.

Hard-Working: To be a fisherman in Lake Pátzcuaro is by definition to be hard-working. However, José María surpasses even that high bar when he dedicates himself to learning to read and write, and also commits himself to buying a boat, fishing gear, and more so he can support a wife (and eventually) children. When José María and Maclovia set out to explore the land beyond the island of Janitzio, they have a high chance of success because they are both hard-working. Knowing her father (and Sara) were trampled to death by a rampaging crowd intent on stoning both Maclovia and José María to death is even more motivation to maintain a hard-working attitude and survive.

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. Maclovia is a Purépecha Indian who lives on Janitzio Island, where their customs and traditions are assiduously preserved. While there is clearly some syncretism with respect to the Catholic Church which folded in preHispanic traditions and beliefs, there is evidence that many are preserved from earlier times.

Please describe some of the traditions that are adhered to, which figure prominently in the film. They can include "Noche de Muertos," as well as the dress, ways of fishing, and customs within families.

2. The Purépecha Indians are very poor, despite the fact that they are very adroit fishermen, and they have a support system in the entire community. Describe the business practices of the ironically named store owner, Don Generoso (Mr. Generous). How do his prices and financing affect the ability of the Purépecha to advance economically?

3. Describe the way in which *Maclovía* might be considered a nostalgic dreamworld, with the island of Janitzio an almost enchanted world of archetypal personages whose activities reveal the essential nature of human existence. Identify at least four archetypal figures, and describe their attributes and roles. They can include the hero, the villain, the dutiful daughter, the teacher, the Patriarch, and more.

4. Power is exhibited in several different ways in *Maclovía*. Describe the way that power and control (or agency) are expressed in the film by characters such as Tata Macrario, Sargento García, Don Justo, Don Generoso, the mob, and the Church. Conversely, there are examples of powerlessness and lack of agency. Describe them and how they are enacted in the case of *Maclovía* and José María. What are the underlying reasons for the power and powerlessness?