

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## FORGOTTEN FACES / Rostros Olvidados (1952)

Julio Bracho

Mexico – Spanish

Link to full video:

<https://ok.ru/video/3349318011568>

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### OVERVIEW

Julio Bracho's melodrama, *Forgotten Faces / Rostros Olvidados* (1952), explores many of the same concerns of his other films of the 1950s, namely memory loss, secrets, shame, vulnerability, and the price society exacts for deviating from societal norms. In this rather disturbing tale, the protagonist, Rosario Velázquez, is a mother who seeks expiation for what she considers the unforgiveable errors of her youth; falling in love with a married man who was enchanted by her talent and success as a singer and actress, having his child, and then choosing her career over having him maintain her as a “kept” woman. When a train accident leads her to believe her baby was killed, Rosario suffers a deep psychological shock resulting in amnesia, and losing all her memory of anything having to do with her personal life. Years later, she regains her memory, and embarks on a journey to right the wrongs, and have a relationship with her daughter, even though it requires sacrificing her reputation and her newly restored love with the father of her child. There are many echoes of Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windemere's Fan* in this story, but it is far from comedic or farcical, but instead, a melodrama that explores the psychological anguish of a woman who has lived in a twilight world of amnesia until being emotionally shocked back into full awareness of her past. The story is that of redemption and maternal love; but it is also a normative, cautionary tale about how women who stray from their societally-determined behaviors can face severe consequences.

*Auteur* By 1953, director Julio Bracho was well known for exploring psychological situations and conditions, especially as they related to the often obsessive desires of both men and women, and the secrets, shameful past, and intense desire for transcendent love and unity that can heal shattered hearts and lives. Bracho, whose background in theatre, and whose willingness to incorporate avant-garde techniques and content, had made him a well-known and respected auteur at the time of *Rostros Olvidados*. In this film, as in the case of others, he confines himself to the rarefied world of the elite, but he shows it to be a nightmare world of rigid adherence to social norms, and cruel abandonment for those who dare to transgress. Bracho's ability to navigate the world of both high culture and that of over-the-top emotionality makes the film engaging and emotionally compelling, although the plot strains credulity in more than one place.

*Film* *Rostros Olvidados* did not garner the same attention or praise as *Rosenda* (1948) or *Stolen Paradise* (1953). However, it was successful and the Argentine actress who played Rosario received positive critical attention. The film is remarkable for its point of view shots that provide a sense of immediacy to the action and intensify the emotional pull.

*Background* In the early 1950s, the Golden Age of Mexican cinema was in full force, still profiting from the 1940s war years when Hollywood was forced to curtail production due to rationing and censorship. Mexican films were able to address themes that had long become taboo in Hollywood, thanks to the Hayes Code and politically-motivated censorship during World War II and then in the Cold War when Senator McCarthy attempted to ferret out Hollywood's Communists and blacklist them. None of that was happening in Mexico, and as a result, the films that emerged were fascinatingly morally ambiguous, both lionizing and punishing the protagonists who dared follow their own path and to fight their own battles through a Mexico that cherished tradition while also embracing modernity.

## SYNOPSIS

Famed Argentine singer and actress Rosario Velázquez falls in love with a married man, a wealthy entrepreneur in Mexico City, and gives birth to a little girl. Although he offers to fund Rosario and the daughter, the idea of giving up her successful singing and recording career is terrible, nor does she want to be anywhere near the wife and rest of the family. Rosario goes on the road with her 4 or 5-month old daughter, but tragedy occurs when Rosario is left behind at a station during a stop, and the train bearing her baby is in an accident with many deaths. The shock of the news and horrific guilt trigger a severe case of amnesia, leaving Rosario "a woman without a past" except for her professional life. Anything having to do with her private (and quite secret) life was wiped clear. Year pass. Rosario's career has flourished, and she has learned to live without memories until one day, in New York, headlines featuring Roberto Hondacasa, the father of her child, restore her memories. Overwhelmed with grief, she finds him. His wife has died and he now has three daughters – one of which is the one he had with Rosario. He will not tell her which one, but Rosario wants to love all three. As she gets to know the daughters, she sees that the oldest, Marta, is consumed with the same kind of "forbidden love" that she was at her age. In trying to protect Marta from the advances of a married man, Rosario sacrifices herself in many ways: donating her blood after a horse accident, and then pretending that it was she rather than Marta who was having an affair with Manuel, the married man. Rather than a fan, it is a beaded purse, but in that scene the secrets, the shame of illegitimacy, and public scandal are much like those in Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windemere's Fan*. After destroying her rekindled romance with Roberto, Rosario continues touring until one day she finds herself with a contract to perform in Acapulco, where Roberto and his daughters have come to see the performance. All are present but Marta, who has decided to go boating in the middle of the night, as a storm is whipping up in the bay. Roberto rushes from the open-air seaside restaurant where Rosario is performing when he receives the news. Rosario joins him on the beach later to find out the status of the search and rescue. Marta is alive; and she tells Roberto that Rosario was never guilty. As the Pacific surf pounds the beach, there is an intense rapprochement, and Roberto and Rosario are finally united.

## CHARACTERS

<i>Rosario Velázquez</i>	Famous Argentine singer and dancer who suffers from amnesia
<i>Roberto Hondacasa</i>	Successful Mexican businessman who falls in love with Rosario
<i>Marta</i>	One of three of Roberto's daughters
<i>Claudia</i>	One of three of Roberto's daughters
<i>Julieta</i>	The youngest of the three daughters
<i>Manuel Lezcano</i>	Married man who is seducing Marta

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Rosario Velázquez:**

An Argentine singer and actress who travels the world, Rosario is as passionate as the songs she sings. It is an Achilles heel and leads to her downfall as she falls in love with a married man. The loss of her baby daughter and the subsequent amnesia create a situation that, when she regains her memory, she is driven by a deep remorse, shame, and guilt.

*Romantic:* Rosario is a romantic and was drawn to emotional intensity, especially when amplified by the taboo and the forbidden. Her relationship with Roberto was illicit and as such, all the more intense, at least in her eyes. The kind of romantic intensity she values is reflected in a poem recited by Marta's married suitor, Manuel Lezcano, who recites a verse to Marta as he tries to seduce her. It is from "Nuestro Amor" by the Mexican poet, Xavier Villaurutia:

If together our lips,  
Naked like bodies  
And together our bodies  
Like naked lips  
Did not form a body  
A conjoined inhalation  
If our love were not like that,  
It would not be our love!

*Guilt-ridden:* The fact she left her baby unattended in a train that subsequently crashed was so emotionally traumatizing to Rosario that she developed amnesia. Her brain was protecting her from the guilt. When she recovered her memories, essentially all her actions were motivated by guilt and also a desire for expiation for her actions.

*Sacrificial:* Like Lady Windemere's mother in Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windemere's Fan*, Rosario lays claim to Marta's beaded purse in order to protect Marta and her reputation, which would have been ruined had she gone through with having intimate relations with the married Manuel Lezcano. Rosario boldly asserts that it was she who was having the affair, much to the displeasure of Roberto.

*Talented Singer:* Wherever Rosario goes, she is greeted with adulation and adoring fans who tell her how much they admire her and her work. This is Rosario's public persona and has been since she was young. It is the face the world sees; they do not see her personal life, and so when she lost her memory of the part of her life that was intensely in love, there was no one to give her breadcrumbs back to the objective correlative – the people that corresponded to the shadows in her memory. Further, if they did know about the baby, perhaps it was presumed that it was killed in the train crash. It's not very clear how Roberto got his hands on the baby.

### **Roberto Casahonda:**

As a wealthy and influential businessman, and a member of the elite, Roberto Casahonda enjoys a very privileged position in society, with all the advantages of one that is male dominated. While the idea that Rosario might have a child out of wedlock would be scandalous and could ruin her reputation, as a wealthy male, his "peccadillos" are overlooked, and in contrast, even considered honorable if he made sure to provide for their well-being.

*Romantic:* Drawn to the highly emotional and sentimental stylings of Rosario Velazquez, Roberto lives in the throes of past romance and emotional highs as he listens to her recordings. It is not clear what he thinks of her continuing to tour the world, record, and continue to be successful with nary a word back to him ever; apparently no curiosity whatsoever about the fate of the baby girl who, as it turns out, survived the train crash.

*Responsible:* With three well-behaved, well-educated daughters, it is clear that Roberto is a responsible father who prioritizes the health and emotional welfare of his daughters. He is in contact with them during the day by phone, and he cares about their well-being as he brings them with him to the mountain getaway to ride horses, and then later to Acapulco.

*Generous:* When he brought the baby home, he and his wife raised it with their other two girls and gave all three the same level of love so that when his wife passed away, all three girls considered her their mother. While this is clearly a credit to the mother, it is also a credit to the dad, who made sure that such love was uniform, universal, and consistent.

## THEMES

**Sacrifice:** The theme of sacrifice is illustrated in many scenes in the film, beginning with the decision of Roberto to take the little girl home to raise her, rather than take the easy way out and let someone adopt her. Rosario sacrifices her blood to provide a transfusion for Marta after being thrown from a horse, but the ultimate sacrifice occurs when she claimed to have picked up Marta's beaded purse in order to protect her and keep her presence in Manuel's rooms a secret. Rosario sacrifices her good standing in Roberto's eyes, along with the relationship when she does so.

**Redemption:** Rosario wants to redeem herself for behaving out of the bounds of societal norms, first by having an affair with a married man, then bearing his child. Then, when the train takes off with the baby on board, and Rosario is still in the station, she condemns herself for being irresponsible. When she regains her memory, she attempts to redeem herself for not being the kind of mother she wanted to be.

**Seduction:** Manuel Lezcano preys upon the beautiful, young Marta. He wants to seduce her despite the fact she is married and he has not been forthcoming about his status. This behavior echoes her own father's seduction of Rosario, except that Rosario was not perceived as being so young or innocent when they had a relationship since she was already working in the world and on her own. Nevertheless, imbalances of power, prestige, status, and celebrity can create situations that naturally construct a mechanism of seduction.

**Fatherhood:** Roberto is depicted as a highly responsible and respectable father who cares about his daughters and wants to protect them. He also stepped up and took responsibility for the "love child" he fathered with Rosario, and loved the daughter as much as the others.

**Motherhood:** Although the mother of two of Roberto's three daughters did not actually give birth to all three, she raised her as though she were her own, which, although she was not her biological mother, constitutes the behavior of a true mother. Rosario, on the other hand, was a biological mother, but when she lost her memory, and then believed that her daughter had died in the train accident, did not demonstrate maternal love. However, in her quest for expiation, and in the act of sacrificial love to save a girl who could have been her daughter, she demonstrated maternal love.

**Memory and the Structures of the Mind:** A severe emotional shock resulted in emotional and psychological trauma, to the point that Rosario lost her memory. Her brain protected itself. However, eventually, the memories came back, first at the mention of Mexico, and then when she saw headlines announcing the visit of a prominent Mexican businessman in New York City, and then seeing his name and photograph.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

1. The name of this film is "Rostros Olvidados" (Forgotten Faces) – which faces were forgotten? How might the title mean something else; be a metaphor for consciousness itself, and the problematic nature of memories, identity, and reality?
2. Despite the fact that there are so many characters in the film who want to experience an intense, emotionally-gratifying love, the fact that there is so little resolution makes it apparent that the film explores the impossibility of romantic love. Describe how this might be the case, and list the scenes that support the idea.

3. Is Rosario a sympathetic character? How does one's perception of her change over the course of the film? Which scenes are the most effective at changing the audience's sympathy for her?

4. How does Roberto represent an ideal of masculinity in the film? When and where does the film subvert notions of masculinity? When and where does he take on more attributes than are usually associated with "macho" culture?

5. How does Marta embody the kind of feminine presence that has to be rescued? What does her proximity to being compromised physically, or drowning evoke echoes of other literary personae who were beautiful but who suffered precisely because they were beautiful, innocent, etc. Examples may include Shakespeare's Ophelia, Petrarch's Laura, Dante's Beatrice, Pre-Raphaelite depictions of femininity, and more. You may add your own.

## SCENES

The three daughters of successful Mexico City businessman, Roberto Casahonda, are preparing to surprise their father with presents for his birthday. They live in a home that is an example of 1950s modernism, and shows not only that he is wealthy, but also that he is part of the forward-looking elites in Mexico who were putting Mexico on the map for innovative, avant-garde architecture. Marta, who is the oldest of the daughters, has purchased an album for her father. It is of his favorite recording artist, Rosario Velázquez. It is not clear if anyone knows that Rosario is the mother of one of the daughters; only that Roberto's love for her artistry is well known.



## ROSARIO

18 years ago. Rosario was a performer and singer in an elaborate musical revue where she sang, danced, and played the guitar. In the flashback, Roberto embraces Rosario. They have a child together, but he is a married man. He offers to take care of the child, but Rosario says she must continue with her career and leave him, rather than disturbing his marriage and his family.



## ACCIDENT

Rosario leans over her baby to feed it with a bottle. This point of view shot frames Rosario in a kind of maternal glow, and she nurtures her child. Roberto had pointed out that it will be a precarious existence for her, between trains, hotels, venues, and relentless travel. Rosario makes a kind of ursatz crib, with pillows propped so the baby will not roll off onto the floor.

The train is approaching a station where Rosario must send a telegram to her agent about a business issue. The dark smoke that blocks the sun foreshadows the years that are to come, and predicts dark times ahead. Rosario speaks to the station master about sending a telegram. Before she entered the station, the conductor explained that they were behind schedule and would only be at the station for 5 minutes. Rosario does not know this, and thinks she has enough time to write out her message and send it. She does not. The station master meticulously calculates the characters and the cost to send the telegram. Time is ticking away.



The train is leaving the station, several minutes before Rosario expected, and she is left behind. The dark train leaving the station is doomed. It is involved in an accident which results in many fatalities. When Rosario hears the news, she collapses. She suffers from shock-induced amnesia and remembers no details of her personal life (child, love, etc.).



## REMEMBERING

After spending some time in a psychiatric hospital, without any luck whatsoever in recovering her memory, Rosario becomes accustomed to being a woman without a past. She does remember her professional aspects, but everything having to do with Roberto Casahonda, their love, and their child, has been expunged from her memory. Since her affair with Roberto was a secret, her manager, the musicians, and her contacts are not able to help her remember. The baby is assumed to have been killed in the accident. Years later, Rosario's career is thriving and she travels internationally. She is in New York for a performance. She sees a newspaper headline indicating that the famous Mexican businessman, Roberto Casahonda, will be in town. When she sees his name and Mexico, memories flood back. She has to see him. Rosario calls Roberto Casahonda and she speaks to him after 18 years. He is shocked. Meeting for the first time in many years, the passion reignites. She learns that Roberto's wife passed away and that he has two daughters. He also has news, but he warns her that it will be more terrible than she might have anticipated. The news is that her daughter is alive. She survived the wreck, and that he was able to get the child and bring it home to raise it as his own. The wife accepted that, and so there were three daughters, and all considered the mother their own. This seems far-fetched, but if the baby was only 4 or 5 months old, it's sort of plausible. Rosario has agreed to the terrible condition that she can meet the daughters, but she must not reveal that she is the mother of one of them, or try to determine which one is her birth daughter.



## REUNION

In Mexico City, at the home of Roberto Casahonda and his daughters, Rosario waits with a great deal of anxiety and tension. She is flooded with the memories that were restored just recently, after more than 15 years. The point of view shot suggests an omniscient narrator or perspective, and a certain neutrality. Rosario meets the daughters, Marta (the oldest), Claudia, and Julieta (the youngest). Claudia is a bit stand-off-ish, but Marta and Julieta are warm to her. Marta, in particular, seems to relate to her. Roberto quietly observes the responses of his daughters to Rosario. They know that he admires her, but it is not clear how much more they know. Roberto tells the girls that he would like to invite Rosario to accompany them to a weekend retreat in a forested, mountainous region outside the city.



## MARIA'S LOVE

Marta has fallen in love with a man who has an enigmatic background. They have a clandestine rendezvous and he wants to intensify the relationship. She does not know anything about his personal life or family commitments. Manuel pressures Marta to meet with him, implying sexual relations. She does not yet have the courage to ask him whether or not he is free to have a relationship with her.



Rosario sees parallels between her own life and that of Marta, and she implores Marta to find out if Manuel is married, and also to break it off with him. She tries to protect Marta, but her efforts (not surprisingly) backfire. Marta has slipped off to meet Manuel while Claudia and Julieta enjoy sitting under a tree and listening to Rosario sing an Argentine zamba. It is a song that was a hit record, and little Julieta is enraptured by it. Claudia is equally appreciative.

Marta is riding a white horse to meet with Manuel in a cabin in the woods. When she meets with Manuel, he wants to have intimate relations with her. She refuses, but he pressures her. She tells him she must return and that her sisters are waiting for her. He reluctantly lets her go. Flustered by Manuel's pressuring her to have intimate relations, and his evasiveness about his marital status, Marta races back to be with her sisters. As she does so, she takes dangerous shortcuts and jumps. In her haste, she miscues her horse, who trips over an obstacle she tried to jump, and she is thrown from the horse. She is injured, but thankfully her neck is not broken. The doctor recommends having a transfusion to be on the safe side, and it turns out the Rosario is a match for their blood type and she donates blood. This leads Rosario to be convinced that Marta is her daughter. The notion that Rosario gives her blood to save Marta's life is a powerful metaphor for Rosario's redemptive attempts – expiation for having expunged the existence of her daughter from her mind (via amnesia) for 18 years.





Marta bounced back from the fall from the horse, but she did not learn anything. She is still under the spell of the very married Manuel, who would like to have a rendezvous with her after an elegant dinner and dancing party. As Marta tries on her dress, Rosario intuitively senses what is going on and she is determined to protect Marta at all costs, and thwart the lecherous Manuel, who is taking advantage of the young woman.



Despite the fact that Manuel and his wife arrived together, and that the wife was presented to the Casahonda family, Marta is deliriously in love (under his spell) and she clings to him as they dance. Manuel's wife observes what is happening and is not deceived. However, she does nothing but observe. The parallels between Roberto and Rosario are clear, and it makes the audience wonder what Roberto's wife thought – there was no reason why she did not know. Further, what was her real reaction when he showed up with a “motherless” baby? These questions are not answered in the film.



Marta has doubts, but Manuel mesmerizes her with his desire. She is easily influenced, and does not have the strength of will to say “no.” Rosario follows Marta to the hotel that Manuel has selected for his “conquest” of the young and very naïve Marta. Rosario enters and confronts Marta, telling her that she is there to protect her from the advances of the predator (the “wolf”) who will use her and then discard her.



Roberto learns of the rendezvous and he wants to get to the bottom of it and protect Marta from Manuel Lezcano, and he wants to unmask Manuel, whom he once considered a friend, for the dog that he is. When he arrives at the apartment / hotel suite, however, he is shocked to find it is Rosario – even though he recognizes Marta's beaded clutch purse on a cabinet. When Manuel points to the beaded clutch and suggests it is Marta's, Rosario assumes a trappy, temptress pose and says she stealthily borrowed it from Marta. She is the siren, and she was having an intimate relationship with Manuel.



Their secret safe between them, Marta extends her hand in gratitude to the sacrifice of Rosario, who impugned her own reputation in order to shield Marta. Roberto and Rosario have no communications with each other after Rosario let it seem that she was having an affair with Manuel. However, coincidentally, Rosario is in Acapulco for a series of engagements in an upscale beach nightclub at the same time that Roberto is vacationing there with his daughters. She is dressed elegantly and performing when the concert is interrupted for an announcement that Marta Casahonda has been lost in a boating accident, and that the purpose of the announcement was to let Roberto, who is in the audience with his other daughters, know.



Rosario runs to the beach to see if there is any news. It is not clear why Marta would go out in a small boat at night, and that weird circumstance is never explained. This is melodrama and not a documentary (!). In the fear for Marta's life and dreading the knowledge of her fate, Roberto embraces Rosario. The cinematography, with the waves lapping up to the sandy beach, gives the appearance that they are gazing off into oblivion.



The surf pounds away as a distant storm stirs up the waters. Marta is rescued and is alive. At that point, she confesses that she was the one who was entranced by the attentions of the wolf, Manuel Lezcano, and it was not Rosario (which never made much sense, given that Rosario appeared to be at least 10 years older than the wolf who liked the nubile ones, and not the worldly ones). With the truth, Rosario stand on the beach and watches the waves. Roberto confesses his love, and Rosario melts in gratitude and relief at the idea that she has been finally forgiven for having been an absent mother (due to her amnesia) and also, by extension, for having transgressed societal norms and opted for a career. The film ends with Rosario and Roberto united at least, and free to marry and live the life that might have been possible if Roberto had not been married and Rosario had not been a world-famous singer. Rosario lets it slip that she thought that Marta was her child. Roberto claims that she is mistaken, and it was not Marta.

