

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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SALON MEXICO (1949)

Emilio Fernández

Genre: Melodrama

Link to the film: <https://youtu.be/jL-pVcEsgH4>

OVERVIEW

Salón México is Emilio Fernández's dark, noir masterpiece about sacrifice, heroism, and dreams where one is willing to endure humiliation, shame, and physical punishment in order to assure a brighter future for the one you love. At the heart of this film is the physical place, Salón México, which was once one of the most renowned clubs in Mexico City, which featured live music and dance, along with food and drink, in an intense, smoky, loud, sexually charged environment so unique it inspired Aaron Copland to write his symphonic work, *Salón México*, and to incorporate the different dance rhythms such as rumba and danzón. It is the story of Mercedes, a woman with a secret: she pretends to her sister to be a successful businesswoman in a distant city, while in reality she is a "fichera," a dancer-for-hire at Salón México. To earn money to make sure her sister can attend an exclusive girl's boarding school and thus potentially be in a position to have a better life, she will do almost anything necessary. As her sister is about to graduate and marry a young pilot war hero, circumstances conspire to expose her secret, and they would have if it were not for the compassionate actions of a widower beat cop who comes to know and understand the great sacrifices that she is making for her sister. The story itself is touching, but with Gabriel Figueroa's photography and the brilliant music and soundtrack, the film achieves true noir greatness.

SYNOPSIS

Salón México opens with a dancer for hire (and prostitute) Mercedes, and Paco, (a low-life criminal) entering a danzón contest where the prize is 500 pesos. Both need the money, but neither will say why. When Paco refuses to split the money, Mercedes sneaks into his hotel room and steals it from him then throws the empty wallet on the street. She is witnessed by the policeman, Lupe López, assigned to that block. She walks quickly under the cover of night to her small tenement room where she tenderly opens her closet and takes out an elegant suit that she irons. She skillfully prepares her hair, applies makeup, and leaves, looking all the world like a successful businesswoman. Lupe, the policeman, follows her and discovers her secret. Mercedes has been doing whatever she can (prostitution, lying, stealing), to support her younger sister's education at one of the most exclusive private schools in Mexico City. He is stunned by her sacrifice and considers her to be heroic in her own right. The headmistress of the school has openly wondered, but no one has any idea. Things get a bit complicated when the headmistress's son, Roberto, a war hero shot down near Okinawa and permanently disabled, falls in love with Beatrix and wants to ask for Beatrix's hand in marriage, but she is a "no show" having been rounded up with Paco, who decided to hide out in her tenement room after robbing a bank and shooting three policemen. Mercedes is in jail and can't get out until the judge comes back on Monday. In the meantime, Lupe meets with Roberto to tell him that Mercedes has to reschedule. They are both wearing uniforms. The next week, Mercedes is able to meet with Roberto and Beatrix. He proposes after taking them flying, and the idea is to marry after Beatrix graduates from the prep school after Christmas. In the meantime, Mercedes continues to lie, cheat, steal and whore in a final push to get Beatrix graduated and married so she can retire and accept Lupe's proposal of marriage. She is mocked, thrown around, and generally abused for her behavior and efforts – Salón México can be a rough place. The day before graduation, Paco breaks out of jail. He is waiting for Mercedes in her tenement, and tells her to come with him to Guatemala. He also sneers at her and says he wants to go by the school and tell everyone there who she really is. Mercedes tells him he is not leaving the room alive, and she means it. She grabs a large knife and plunges it over and over into his back. He turns, pulls out a gun, and shoots her several times. The next

day, Roberto and Lupe identify the body. Beatrix, who is graduating, tears up as she sees that she has been stood up again by her sister (she has not been told the news). However, Roberto is there to congratulate her, and the Headmistress warmly congratulates her as well. That night, at Salón México, we see Lupe enter the dancehall.

PRIMARY CHARACTERS

Mercedes Gómez: Dancer for hire at Mexico City's famous club, Salón México
Lupe López: Widower beat cop assigned to the neighborhood around Salón México
Paco: Pimp, criminal low-life
Roberto: Son of the Señora Directora; decorated wounded officer and pilot
Señora Directora: Director of the exclusive girl's boarding school / academy
Beatriz Gómez: Younger sister of Mercedes; finishing her final year of school

STORY

DANCE CONTEST The opening shot of Salón México, showing the dancehall from the street at night. The lights strewn across the street look like a carpet of stars ascending to the vertical signage. Mercedes Gómez greets Lupe López, a policeman whose beat is the street and the intersection near Salón México. Mercedes is a "taxi dancer," a dancer for hire. Many times taxi dancers are also sex workers, which is implied in the case of Mercedes. Mercedes and Paco participate in a Danzón competition which has as prize money \$500 pesos. Both Mercedes and Paco are in great need of the money. A point of view shot that shows Mercedes as she dances with Paco. The complex moves of the Danzón are highlighted. In the back, the judges are sitting at the table observing them. Paco explains to Mercedes that he needs the prize money and will not share it with her. Mercedes, who is half-made with her desperate need for money, protests. She is holding the trophy, which Paco tells her she can have in lieu of half of the winnings. Desperate for the 500 pesos, Mercedes sneaks into Paco's room, where he is sleeping with a woman who was standing on the street outside the hotel. She slips her hand under his pillow and finds his wallet. She opens it to see if it contains the money. It does. She slips out with it.



BEATRICE, SISTER The sun is rising in the east as Mercedes leaves her rented room, looking all the world like a successful businesswoman, with her smartly pressed suit, her fashionable hat, and stylish bag. The principal of the school greets Mercedes warmly and has nothing but praise for Beatriz and her grades. The principal does chide Mercedes for missing visitor hours, and for not being more forthcoming about her background and relatives. As she and Beatriz leave the exclusive school to have time together and to explore the park and shops. They encounter Lupe, who has followed them to the exclusive private boarding school for girls. Mercedes is terrified, but Lupe cares about her and is touched by what he sees. Mercedes looks up at the cathedral and describes how its magnificence makes her feel inspired, and that in contrast, the problems at ground level are inconsequential. Beatrice listens thoughtfully. Together, Beatriz and Mercedes visit the Anthropological museum at Chapultepec. They look at artifacts from the Aztec culture that was on the ground beneath their feet when the Spaniards arrived. In addition, they look at Chac Mool. The artifacts refer back to a time of human sacrifice, which reinforces the theme of sacrifice in the film.



PACO, THE PIMP The owner of the Salón México looks askance at Paco, who is a notorious pimp and abuser of women. Paco confronts Mercedes, forces her to his hotel room where he demands that she return the 500 pesos. She explains that she cannot, and he proceeds to brutally assault her. Lupe, suspecting that Paco is up to no good and could potentially harm Mercedes, follows them to the hotel where Paco stays. The camera angle looking down from the landing to the staircase silhouetted in light and shadows, contributes to the film's distinctive "noir" atmosphere. Lupe ascends the staircase and intervenes to rescue Mercedes. He then fights with Paco, ultimately defeating the much younger man. Comforting Mercedes after she has been brutally beaten by Paco for having stolen his wallet and the winnings. He tells her that she is pure gold, and that he loves her for her sacrifice and dreams for her sister.



LUPE Comforting Mercedes after she has been brutally beaten by Paco for having stolen his wallet and the winnings. He tells her that she is pure gold, and that he loves her for her sacrifice and dreams for her sister. Lupe confesses to Mercedes that he admires her sacrifice for the sake of her sister and her sister's future. With a backdrop of showers of sparks (that look like meteors and stars), Lupe professes his love again to Mercedes and asks her to marry him as soon as Beatriz graduates. Mercedes is moved to tears.



ROBERTO, THE WAR HERO, RETURNS The school's director runs to greet her son, Roberto, who has arrived in a plane he piloted. Roberto, a war hero, walks with a cane due to an injury sustained in a battle in the Pacific Theatre of WWII. They are on the grounds of the private girl's school. The school director gives Beatriz a tray of small sandwiches and an empty tea cup in anticipation of a small tea reception to honor her son's return. Roberto finds her to be endearing and charming.



BEATRIZ GRADUATES Beatriz looks out into the audience to see if her sister has attended her graduation. The school director, who knows that Mercedes was murdered, looks at her with tragic compassion. After being comforted by the school director, Beatriz makes her way past the stage, her diploma gripped in her hand. She looks into the audience and she sees Roberto, who is there to personally congratulate her and to function as her family member. She is overwhelmed with joy.



BEATRIZ ENGAGED Mercedes appears to meet with Roberto. The uniforms symbolize modesty, hard work, and decency. Mercedes describe her experience in the plane, and how to fly a 10,000 meters made her feel free and joyous – liberated from all the problems below, in the “mud.” Roberto describes the peace and tranquility he feels when flying. Roberto asks for Beatriz’s hand in marriage. They will be married after Beatriz graduates at the end of December.



BANK ROBBERY Paco’s new “business” is that of robbing banks. He works with a safecracker and others to rob a bank. The alarms sounds, and in getting away, Paco shoots the guard and policemen. Policemen are in hot pursuit of Paco and the other criminals. Paco, who has murdered the guard and policemen scrambles for a place to hide. He chooses the room that Mercedes has rented. Paco brutalizes Mercedes, who tells him to stay away from her and to not implicate her in any of his criminal activities. It is no use. The policemen find Paco and apprehend the both of them.



JAIL Paco brutalizes Mercedes, who tells him to stay away from her and to not implicate her in any of his criminal activities. It is no use. The policemen find Paco and apprehend the both of them. Although Mercedes is innocent, she is locked up. Lupe visits her and attempts to have her released, but it is impossible because the judge will not be there until Monday. Lupe explains to her that it is not really a fair assessment and that Mercedes is going through great sacrifices in order to provide an education.



PACOP ATTACKS MERCEDES Paco has escaped from prison. In his striped prison garb, he attacks Beatriz. He wants to escape and go to Guatemala, and he insists that she accompany him. Before that, though, he wants to go by the private academy where Beatriz is slated to graduate, and to inform them who Mercedes really is. He also hints that he has even darker, more murderous intentions. Beatriz will not let that happen, and she stabs him with a kitchen knife.



MERCEDES DIES Paco has escaped from prison. In his striped prison garb, he attacks Beatriz. He wants to escape and go to Guatemala, and he insists that she accompany him. Before that, though, he wants to go by the private academy where Beatriz is slated to graduate, and to inform them who Mercedes really is. He also hints that he has even darker, more murderous intentions. Beatriz will not let that happen, and she stabs him with a kitchen knife. As he dies from her stabbing, Paco shoots Mercedes in the squalid quarters where she has saved every penny she can so that Beatriz could go to an exclusive school and transcend her desperate origins and secure a good marriage and a decent life.



THEMES

Sacrifice: Mercedes is sacrificing her health, safety, and youthful years when she could have found a husband and married him in order to earn money as a dancer for hire, or “taxi-dancer” at a popular dance club. She is regularly humiliated and abused, and yet she does it so that her sister, Beatriz, can have a future that is of a much higher level than Mercedes could ever aspire to.

In addition to the sacrifice that Mercedes makes, Lupe, the decorated and honored policeman seeks to sacrifice his quiet life, his savings, and more in order to marry Mercedes and take her from her situation. He tells her that she is pure gold, who will always remain unchangeably pure, no matter how low her circumstances. Lupe intercedes for Mercedes at key moments, including when she was falsely imprisoned, and when she was unable to meet with her little sister’s prospective fiancé.

Roberto, the son of the Director of the school, walks with a cane and a limp after being shot down in the Pacific Theatre during World War II. As a pilot in the Air Force during wartime, he sacrificed his health and security.

Dreams: Mercedes is driven by her dream of a wonderful life for her sister, Beatriz – a life she she has given up on for herself. Her dreams make her sacrifice herself, and also shame herself by lying and stealing from men in order to have the money she needs to pay for Beatriz’s room, board, expenses, and clothing.

Roberto has the dream of having a house, a family, and above all, a wife “who is like a fresh spring breeze.” When he meets Beatriz, he realizes that she is precisely the woman that he has dreamed of. She is intelligent, pretty, and charming, and she holds strong, core traditional values, as illustrated by her senior speech.

It can be said that Paco has dreams as well, but they are twisted, unwholesome dreams predicated on criminality such as safe-cracking, enslaving women as sex workers for him, and murdering officers of the law.

Heroism: When Beatriz delivered her final senior speech on heroism, she spoke of sacrifice and holding fast to a vision of a higher, better world. She spoke of military battles, but she reserved her highest accolades for mothers who sacrifice for their children. The speech was very moving to the Madame Director, whose own son, Roberto, was a bona fide war hero.

Roberto's heroism in World War II was indisputable, although he claimed it was just a matter of surviving being shot down. Roberto's heroism manifests his patience, valor, and compassion with Beatriz, Lupe, and Mercedes.

Lupe is a hero in this film. He intercedes and protects Mercedes, even putting his life in danger when he fought Paco, a much younger man, for his abhorrent treatment of Mercedes. Lupe also finds out that Mercedes has been mistakenly imprisoned and he manages to get her in front of a judge to release her. He also identifies Mercedes' body after she is murdered, but he does not reveal her background.

MOTIFS:

The Low – on the floor:

Timid little Beatriz trips and falls with a plate of finger food and an empty tea cup, right at the feet of Roberto, the injured war hero

Trumpet player playing an incredibly erotic Cuban song, and as he plays, he literally rolls on the floor, a point of view shot, with the trumpet bell closest to the camera

Mercedes pushed to the floor and jeered after she snatches a 10-peso note from the fingers of a cabaret-goer – she is smacked, kicked, and she rolls on the floor of a smoky, bare bar. When she stops rolling, Paco leans over, extends his hand and lifts her up. She smokes a cigarette and you can see her eyes are deeply bruised

The High – the sky:

Mercedes tells Beatriz that she loves the cathedral because it extends so far into the sky; it is so large it makes all the problems below it seem very small

Mercedes tells Roberto how she loves flying high in the sky, so close to the stars – a pure, unsullied world, so far above the "lodo" (mud)

Roberto tells Mercedes and Beatriz that when he flies, he feels clarity and peace

Juxtapositions – high / low (physical and social)

The most elevated, cultured scenes at the exclusive young ladies' boarding school are always quick-cut to sordid, often sexually suggestive scenes in the smoky Sal6n M6xico, where one's eyes almost burn just watching the smoky dance floor and bar, where each man and woman has a cigarette artfully positioned between fingers, or in their mouths

We see artisanal fireworks of the independence day "El Grito" and for Christmas (Posadas) whirling toward the heavens, followed by quick cuts of people in the club, at the very lowest, most anonymous levels – standing in line to get in, or sitting in the line to be chosen to dance (for money)

Lupe's beautiful speech to Mercedes, after she sits with him, her face bruised and bleeding, her hair matted, her clothes stained – he tells Mercedes that she is pure gold, and her sacrifices for her sister make her so. He goes on to tell her that gold is gold, even if it's surrounded by trash and horrible garbage.

The juxtapositions are what give the narrative so much emotional pull, so much pathos. We see Mercedes and her degraded, humiliating, physically punishing life, and that she is subjecting herself to all that we see, and more, in order to pay for her sister's tuition. The sister is sweet and pure (like the first days of Spring) ... but there is not much depth to little Beatriz. But, that's perhaps another message – young and innocent, with not much more ambition than to adore one's hero of a husband, and to live to make him happy, and do the same for one's family – is the apotheosis of success.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Mercedes Gómez: Salon Mexico is the sort of film I would usually hate. It has to do with a woman who works in a massive dance / music club, Salon Mexico, where there are three different places to dance – formal ballroom dancing, then Cuban “danzon” and Cuban dances, and then, finally, the Afro-Caribbean dances which feature intense Afro-Latinas dancing barefoot to different types of drums and rhythm instruments. There is a sign that asks people to please not throw cigarettes on the floor because they could burn the feet of the dancers. The protagonist is Mercedes, a dancer for hire (taxi dancer?). That’s not the only thing she will do for money – she has a reputation for doing whatever she has to do for money – she seems to combine sexual services with larceny.

Self-destructive: Mercedes is beautiful, but she degrades herself in every possible way for money. Why? We find out really quickly. From her one-room living space (hate to call it an apartment) she transforms herself into a sophisticated businesswoman who most travel – with an ironing board, a mirror, and talent, she emerges with a sophisticated coiffure, a pressed suit and pristine blouse, and an elegant hat. From a 21st century perspective, I’m wondering how she pulls this off. Her lodgings do not seem to have running water, a bathroom, or even a kitchen. But – well, I guess the audience would have known what her lodgings included. Mercedes is beautiful and it seems a shame to do this. Truth is, she could probably marry any time. But, she would not be able to earn (okay “earn” meaning beg, borrow, prostitute oneself, steal) enough to keep her little sister in an exclusive boarding private school in the most exclusive part of Mexico City.

Passionate: Mercedes is passionate and willing to do absolutely anything to achieve her goals – all of which are materialistic. The fact that she can so successfully pull off the role of a successful businesswoman is a true credit to her. One weekend, she showed up with sunglasses, a hair style that covered much of her face, and a coat over tall-necked blouse that would cover all of the bruises all over her body. That implicit juxtaposition – Mercedes the businesswoman vs. Mercedes the humiliated prostitute – nothing could be more extreme.

Idealistic: Mercedes is a dreamer, and although she has a pragmatic side that allows her to do anything for money, she is idealistic, and she wants a perfect future for her little sister, Beatriz. In her idealism, she often makes philosophical statements. For example, Mercedes tells Beatriz that she loves the cathedral because it extends so far into the sky; it is so large it makes all the problems below it seem very small. In a similar conversation, Mercedes tells Roberto how she loves flying high in the sky, so close to the stars – a pure, unsullied world, so far above the “lodo” (mud).

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. People have argued that film noir reflects a deep, nihilistic view of the world, society, and reality. In many ways the gritty environment where Mercedes dances for hire, entertains customers, and makes her way to her bleak, tenement room late at night seems to suggest nihilism. However, there are many aspects, such as the repeated visual elements of lights resembling stars, and light/ fireworks shooting up to the heavens, that could suggest just the opposite – that this is a world of hope and dreams. Please identify four scenes or repeated elements in the film that could further argue against nihilism in this film.
2. There are deep class divides in the Mexico portrayed in *Salón México*, and there are few if any ways to ascend the social hierarchy. Yet, Mercedes believes that Beatriz can receive an education and marry into a respectable social class. Likewise, Lupe believes that Mercedes can put her past behind her and they can marry and start a new life. Please describe two scenes that illustrate the class hierarchy in Mexico.
3. Although the world of *Salón México* is one of the dark, shadowy reaches of night, there are many ways in which flashes of light illuminate the sky and the environment, and seem to symbolize the possibility of hope in the world. Please find three examples of artificial lights in the scenes. What are their metaphorical possibilities?

4. Mercedes engages in rather reprehensible behavior, and yet she is a sympathetic character. What makes the viewer care about her? Please select three scenes and describe what happens to humanize Mercedes and show her admirable qualities.

5. When Lupe and Roberto meet each other, they instantly respect each other. Why is this? How do their uniforms open up an instant rapport? How does Lupe's way of addressing Roberto as an officer further facilitate a mutual respect? What occurs in the morgue?