

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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ROSSANA - THE NET / La Red (1953)

Emilio Fernández (Mexico)

Genre: Romantic Drama

Link to the film: <https://youtu.be/FCBgdFVdc7Y>

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OVERVIEW:

La Red Rossana, originally released as La Red (The Net), was the winner at the 1953 Cannes Film Festival for Best Visual Narration. It was also nominated for the Grand Prize for the Cannes Film Festival and also for a Silver Ariel award for Best Cinematography (Alex Philips). However, despite the recognition it received and its success, particularly in Latin American markets, the film has gone largely unrecognized for how avant-garde and trail-blazing it really was. It is, in essence, a tone poem and a visual narrative that communicates a powerful psychological drama with almost no dialogue. Taking the montage of Sergei Eisenstein's *Que Viva Mexico*, and the soul-baring close-ups of Manuel Alvarez Bravo and Tina Modotti, both renowned for their unforgettable and evocative close-ups of individual and often marginalized Mexicans, *The Net* is a powerful visual narrative that tells a story in film sequences. The pace is slow, which gives the audience the time to absorb the storyline in terms of action and also in terms of powerful emotions connected to deep archetypal realities about the nature of human desire, jealousy, sacrifice, and identity. *The Net* is a story of young woman whose beauty and sensuality compel two best friends to enter into a life of crime, and whose friendship is ultimately destroyed due to rivalry for her affections. What makes the film unique is its use of the ocean, the sky, and scenes of nature to poetically signal emotions and existential states of being, combined with slow-paced lingering close-ups of faces and activities (hand-washing clothes at the river, grinding corn with a giant wooden pestle), and the way the sequences seamlessly communicate archetypal situations which the audiences understand even without dialogue. Because the message is so accessible and relatable to all adult audiences, the film may have failed to garner the recognition it deserved as a truly vanguard example of the ability of film to tell a story that transcends time, cultural difference, and language.

PRIMARY CHARACTERS

Rossana: Beautiful, young woman loved by both Antonio and José Luis
Antonio: Violent criminal in hiding from the law
José Luis: Antonio's friend and criminal sidekick

SYNOPSIS

The Net opens with a scene of two men, Antonio and José Luis, trying to rob a bank. It is ultimately a failed endeavor as the bank security catch them in the act, and start shooting before the two have been able to scoop up the money in the vault. José Luis is shot by a security officer. Antonio tries to carry him, but José Luis admonishes him, and tells him to save himself, and to promise to take care of Rossana, who is José Luis's girlfriend. Antonio escapes with his life. Antonio finds a remote fishing village to hide out from the law. With him is Rossana, who sets up house with Antonio in a rustic beach shack with stick walls and a roof made of palm fronds. Rossana is a young, natural woman who dresses in a long wrap-around skirt and a rather ragged peasant top, which are so transparent and form fitting that she at times seems virtually naked. In this castaway paradise, they subsist on Antonio's sponge and coral diving, which Rossana sells in the nearby fishing village. They are outsiders in a village that distrusts outsiders, so that even though Rossana is greeted with leers and lewd advances. Despite the constant threat of being identified by someone and turned into the police, After Rossana and Antonio have lived in the tiny

beachside fishing shack for a year and a half, José Luis shows up. Antonio offers him a place to stay as his friend, thus setting up a deadly love triangle as Rossana struggles with her deep desire and reanimated love for José Luis, and José Luis struggles to keep his passion in check. Antonio is deeply jealous. As they live together, the law starts to close in, first by following José Luis, who kills the bounty hunters who tried to take him in. Later, a posse of three lawmen show up just as the jealousy between Antonio and José Luis has reached its apex, and Antonio attacks José Luis, intending to fight him to the death. They fight, and José Luis seems to have won, except that Antonio has stolen a high-power rifle. As José Luis and Rossana stroll down the beach, hand in hand, Antonio shoots her in the head. As he is about to shoot José Luis, he sees the lawmen on the beach. Killing all but one, the lawman then shoots Antonio. Devastated, José Luis picks up Rossana's inert body and enters the ocean aglitter from the rays of the setting sun.

THE STORY

BANK ROBBERY

José Luis is shot during the bank robbery, and as Antonio races to him, José Luis urges Antonio to run and save himself, and to “take care of Rossana.” That gives the impression that he cares for Rossana who must have been his girl-friend.



LIVING ON THE COAST

We find that Antonio has found a quiet stretch of coastline miles from the nearest fishing village where he can hide out from the law in a very rudimentary beach house, with palm frond roof and walls of wood, palm fronds, and sticks. Rossana and Antonio live a simple life on the beach, earning the money they need by diving for sponges and corals. Rossana frolics and plays as the waves break onto the beach, and the frothy waters lap up to her feet. Scenes of the ocean punctuate the action of the primary characters, and the scenes serve as a visual metaphor for their interior state of mind and the future.



FRIENDSHIP

The emotional reunion of Antonio and Jose Luis, who explains that he escaped from prison. His eyes show his misgivings. Antonio tells José Luis that he is welcome, and that he should consider the hammock his while they are together. “How’d you find your way here?” he asks José Luis. “I escaped from “The Islands” (the 3 Marias Islands – prison islands, an archipelago in the Pacific off the coast of the Mexican state of Nayarit).”



CRUELTY

Antonio responds by hitting her hard – hand to face. There was no Hays Code in Mexico, and violence toward women was not disguised or played down. She is hit so hard she falls to the ground. Note that she does not escape the net as she falls. Note the presence of the mesh net. It is a visual metaphor that indicates they are already caught in their own nets.



In the meantime, the sexual tension between Rossana and Jose Luis has finally been perceived by Antonio. In this low-angle point of view shot, we see his brutality as he hits her hard on the face and knocks her to the ground for having walked on the beach with Jose Luis.



WOMEN'S LOVE

There are several scenes in the movie that Rossana's caring and love for Jose Luis is growing



Rossana objects to Jose Luis' stay in the house by saying "You know I loved José Luis and I think I still love him."



Antonio, Rossana and José Luis eat their seafood. Both Antonio and José Luis are completely absorbed in the task, but Rossana pauses to steal glances of each as she eats. Without any dialogue whatsoever, the scene paints a picture of a woman who has a dilemma because of she is deeply attracted to José Luis.



After taking José Luis's laundry from him, she sits on a rock, legs apart, extends his shirt, and then grabs a bar of laundry soap that she rubs rhythmically and seductively. Again, although not a word has been said, the message of Rossana's caring for Jose Luis.

WOMEN'S DESIRE

Both Antonio and Jose Luis are completely absorbed in the task, but Rossana pauses to steal glances of each as she eats. Without any dialogue whatsoever, the scene paints a picture of a woman who is deeply attracted to Jose Luis and increasingly repulsed by Antonio,



Antonio is graceful and strong as he dives into the ocean in search of shellfish, sponges, and corals. As he dives, he is observed by Rossana who sits on a rock and observes him.



Later, back at the palapa, Rossana watches Jose Luis sweat as he rhythmically pounds the corn with a huge wooden pestle. Nothing could possibly be more phallic, or suggestive of a proxy for the sex act.



MAN'S LOVE

There are many scenes in the movie that show José Luis' love for Rosanna.



After leaving Antonio and Rosanna, José Luis is gravely injured in a cantina where he was found by two lawmen pursuing him as an escaped fugitive. Because he was incessantly muttering "Rosanna," they bring José Luis to the fishing shack.



José Luis defending Rosanna against an attacker from the town.



José Luis helps Rosanna to carry the heavy load by taking the yoke.

OTHER MEN'S DESIRE

Rossana walks alone into the village. Antonio waits in the shadows in case someone might recognize him. As she makes her way down the main street, barefoot and in her ragged blouse that leaves nothing to the imagination, she is ogled by the men in the village. She is carrying the sponges and corals that Antonio harvested from the sea and intends to sell them in town. She tells Antonio "Haven't you seen how all the men in town undress me with their eyes?"



FIGHTING

Jose Luis has attacked Antonio for his violence to Rossana. Determined to fight to the bitter end, both Antonio and Jose Luis sustain terrible blows from each other as Rossana looks on. After Jose Luis has fought with Antonio and has broken away, Rossana approaches him in a scene that communicates that it is her choice to be with Jose Luis, and she has been hoping for Antonio's defeat.



REVENGE



His stolen gun and cartridge at his disposal, Antonio puts Rossana and Jose Luis in his sites. He is silhouetted against the sky in another dramatic visual representation. Shot in the head, Rossana collapses to the ground and dies.



Alone with the love of his life, for whom he has tried to rob a bank, killed two bounty hunters, and engaged in violence with the person (however violent and flawed) to be his only friend, José Luis walks into the ocean, toward the moonlight shimmering on the waters that are surprisingly calm at last.



THEMES

Jealousy: The driving force between Antonio and José Luis is a primal jealousy. After the failed bank robbery, José Luis is considered to be either dead or in jail. Antonio promised his partner in crime and only friend that that he would take care of his girlfriend. Little did he know that it would lead to a deep-seated jealousy that would be very destructive to the cruel and violent Antonio. The theme of jealousy is played out in a series of closeups and also in different types of montage, namely the tonal montage and the metrical, which juxtapose the closeups of the three, painting love triangle.

Love: Rossana confesses to Antonio that she always loved José Luis and in fact, had never stopped loving him, even after she thought he was gone forever, and despite the fact she was living with Antonio. Her confession sparks a vicious response in Antonio and he smacks Rosanna to the floor. José Luis finds Antonio in the little fishing village not only because Antonio is his partner in crime, but because he loves Rossana. He is respectful of Antonio's place and does not approach Rossana. He does, however, exchange long looks; for example, as she is washing his shirt.

Nature: The sea, with all its changes, ranging from raging, crashing surf on to the cliffs, to a smooth, sparkling surface perfect for swimming, holds up a mirror to the emotional state of the protagonists, and also foreshadows what will happen to them. The sea scenes are repeated, and serve as bookends to episodes, as they mark transitions and closures. In addition to the scenes of the surf and the beach, there are many point of view shots that incorporate the sky, which positions the individuals as silhouettes, playing out their lives in a vast stage.

Sexual attraction: The film is remarkable in its use of visual narrative to depict a growing sexual energy that seethes just beneath the surface, but is never enacted carnally by the characters. The two most remarkable scenes involve the growing intensity of sexual energy between José Luis and Rossana. First, when Rossana takes José Luis's shirt and washes it in the stream, her movements are sensual and very suggestive. Next, when José Luis uses a giant wooden pestle (heavy log-like tool with a rounded end) to crush corn in the mortar (the repository), his rhythmic, repeated thrusts and his sweat-soaked body are extremely sexually suggestive.

Outsider: As criminals on the lam, the two would-be bank robber friends are focused on two things: survival and Rossana. They are violent and ruthless, and even though José Luis may be more sympathetic, one cannot forget that he shot, wounded, and killed lawmen looking for him, and also security guards at the bank. The three are outsiders in a remote fishing village that is in and of itself far outside the mainstream life. The result is a microcosm that enables archetypal dramas to play out without interference or distractions from the outside world.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Rossana: Very little is known about Rossana. She does not seem to have any family ties or any background at all except that she was José Luis's girlfriend at the time of the failed bank robbery, and in his absence, Antonio takes his place.

Siren: Rossana is not a siren in the traditional sense of the word; she does not seem to be calculatingly luring men to their deaths. And yet, she is blamed for the situation because José Luis wanted to do the bank robbery in order to have money to live with Rossana. When Antonio falls in love with her, and then José Luis returns, there is no possible way for there to be a happy ending. In this sense it is almost archetypal, a fact that is remarked upon in town. It is worth noting that in Maclovia, there is also the presence of rivals and intense jealousy.

Submissive: Rossana is completely dependent on Antonio and is submissive. She prepares the meals, washes the clothes, helps wash and prepare the sponges and corals to market, and then does the work of carrying the two heavy baskets hung from a rod that extends across her shoulders, making her look all the world like a beast of burden; a yoked ox. She has been subjugated and is, in face, a human beast of burden, except her youth, beauty, and sensuality give her the sense of a flower or butterfly that is both beautiful and free.

Sensual: Rossana wears the same outfit throughout the film, although it does seem that she has a change of blouse, as in later scenes her blouse is not quite as frayed and ragged as at the beginning. She is the quintessential female, and her form evokes the image of Aphrodite rising from the sea on an opened clamshell. Rossana wears a wraparound skirt and a shoulderless peasant blouse that slides down and leaves her shoulders and the top of her chest exposed. She does not wear a bra, and when she swims, her dress and skirt are rendered transparent. She never wears shoes, but instead, walks everywhere barefoot. She might as well be completely nude, and the men respond to her in that way. The women in the village wear modest clothing. It is interesting to note that both José Luis and Antonio wear traditional men's pants, belt, and button-down shirt. Rossana stands out as a sex goddess of sorts.

Victim of intimate partner abuse: Rossana is an excellent example of the psychological toll of intimate partner abuse. Several scenes show her being hit very hard by Antonio, but instead of fighting back or leaving, she simply rises up, turns the other cheek, and maintains a stoic expression. She has internalized the sense of being an object and unprotected; when she goes into town, she knows that the men ogle her, and even pose a threat, and yet she urges José Luis to stay back because she does not want any villagers to see her with another man. He does not accede; instead he does follow, and thus is able to intervene when a man runs into the street and accosts her sexually.

GUIDING QUESTIONS:

1. Please inventory the scenes in the movie that feature the behavior of the ocean. Make a list and then, next to each one, discuss the scene that has just gone before, and the one afterward. For each ocean scene, explain how the ocean scene reflects the story – either the characters' states of mind or the events that transpire.
2. Analyze the closeups in the scene where Rossana first brings her sponges to sell to the spongedealer. Describe the men's faces and their expressions. Although no words have been said, what are the visual messages that are being communicated? How are these reflected later, so that when words are said to Rossana, they are not a surprise?
3. Antonio is a cruel, violent criminal, and yet he is in love with Rossana and they seem to have an almost idyllic life until José Luis arrives. Describe the way that Antonio's character is depicted in the film, and how it is not as straightforward as it might first seem.
4. Explore the differences between the scenes shot indoors and those outdoors. For example, what is revealed in the fishing hut, the spongedealer's shop, or the cantina (bar) that could not be explained or depicted in the vastness of the beach, sky, and surf?
5. Explore the visual metaphors and describe possible meanings. They include: the two conch shells being tossed around by the surf, the net that Antonio uses and assiduously repairs, the mortar and pestle used for grinding corn, the hand-washing of clothes on the side of a stream, diving into a pool to search for sponges, and others that you see.

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