

Officer tries to establish whether Enrique is Mexican, or when Mrs Rogers is explaining how the washing machine works to Rosa and Nacha, or when Jorge and Enrique laugh at the Mocho because he can't understand Spanish – are innately comic. Gregory Nava, as we can see, is quite prepared to use humour as a means of making serious points about the ways that cultures collide with each other: *El Norte*, after all, is also a story about people missing the point.

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### CAMILA (1984). DIRECTED BY MARÍA LUISA BEMBERG

#### Cast

Camila, played by Susú Pecotaro  
 Ladislao, played by Imanol Arias, and dubbed by Lellio Incrocci  
 La Penchona (Camila's grandmother), played by Mona Marris  
 Adolfo (Camila's father), played by Héctor Alterio

#### Also Starring

Elena Tasisto, Carlos Muñoz, Héctor Pellegrini, Juan Leyrado, Cecilio Madanés,  
 Claudio Gallardou, Boris Rubaja

#### With

Alberto Busaid, Lidia Catalano, Zelmar Gueñol, Jorge Hacker, Carlos Marchi,  
 Roxana Berco, Alejandra Colunga, Alejandro Marcial, Oscar Núñez, Jorge Ochoa,  
 Fernando Iglesias (Tacholas)

#### Crew

Director: María Luisa Bemberg  
 Screenplay: María Luisa Bemberg, Beda Docampo Feijoo, and Juan Bautista Stagnaro  
 Cinematography: Fernando Arribas  
 Editing: Luis César D'Angiolillo  
 Art Directors: Miguel Rodríguez and Esmeralda Almonacid  
 Assistant Director: Alberto Lecchi  
 Camera: Daniel Karp  
 Production Delegate: Paco Molero  
 Wardrobe: Graciela Galán  
 Make-up: Oscar Malet  
 Hairdresser: Rodolfo Spinetta  
 Production Managers: Martha Parga, Clara Zappettini  
 Sound: Jorge Stavropulos  
 Music: Luis María Serra  
 Producer: Lita Santic for Gea Producciones (Argentina) and Impala (Spain)

### Awards

Nominee. Best Foreign Film. Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Hollywood  
 Winner. Best Actress (Susú Pecoraro). Karlovy Vary, 1984  
 Winner. Best Actress (Pecoraro, shared), Havana, 1984

### Plot

Film opens with establishing shot of the pampas: panning shots of the O'Gorman estate. Camila's grandmother, La Perichona, alights from her horse-drawn carriage: is greeted by her son Adolfo, who wishes her well during her house arrest in the tower. Domestic scenes around the estate. In church Camila is seen confessing the contents of a sexual dream; Camila sees the new priest and asks who he is. Camila buys a prohibited book in Mariano's bookshop. During a party at the O'Gorman household Camila falls in love with the new priest, Ladislao. Mariano is murdered, and Ladislao uses his sermon to criticise the perpetrators. Camila praises his action at dinner, and is asked to leave the table by her father. Camila gives some clothes to the Church. In a highly charged confession she confesses her love to Ladislao. Ladislao and Camila have a secret rendez-vous in the belfry and snatch their first kiss. They elope and settle in Goya City, miles from Buenos Aires, and set up a school. Some strains appear in their relationship. Ladislao is discovered by Padre Gannon in a tavern. They are offered horses to flee, but they remain and the Comandante arrives and arrests them. They are both imprisoned, and sentenced to death because of their sacrilegious actions. Despite the possibility of a reprieve for Camila because she is pregnant, they are both shot by firing squad on Rosas's explicit orders. The two bodies are put in the same coffin. Voice-over suggests that they are joined in death.

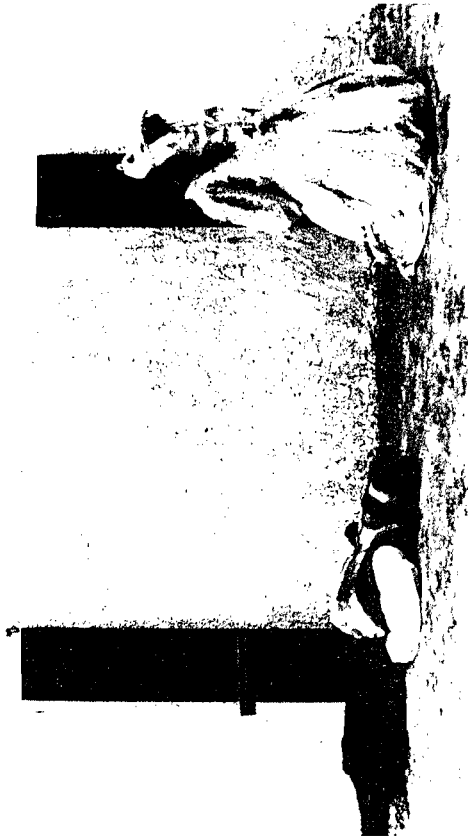
### Historical basis

Intriguingly enough, the actual events which led to the discovery of Camila's and Ladislao's hideaway in the summer of 1848 were even more melodramatic in real life than they were in the film version. (I use Ladislao to refer to the film character and Uladislao Gutiérrez to refer to the historical individual who eloped with Camila O'Gorman in December 1847, since that is how the earliest historical documents spell his name.) Camila O'Gorman, a 20-year-old woman from a wealthy, respected Irish-Argentine family, and Uladislao Gutiérrez, a 23-year-old priest and nephew of the Governor of Tucumán, eloped from Buenos Aires on the night of 11/12 December 1847, and by March of the following year they were teaching at a school they had founded in Goya, in northern Argentina, under the assumed names of Máximo Brandier and Valentina Sanz. The Justice of the Peace in Goya happened to be Esteban Perichón, the brother of Ana María Perichón de Vandeuil (O'Gorman), that is,

Camila's grandmother. La Perichona, who had created a scandal in Buenos Aires over her affair with the Viceroy Santiago Liniers, for which she had been ostracised from Buenos Aires high society. Esteban Perichón had seen Camila only as a baby and the two lovers therefore thought they were safe. But their identities were discovered during a party held at the house of Esteban Perichón to honour Camila's pregnancy, at which, as bad luck would have it. Father Gannon was in attendance. Bemberg chose to drop some of these details no doubt in order to simplify the plot but she thereby passed up the rather intriguing possibility of having the Justice of the Peace discover that he had invited to his house not only an outlaw on the run, but a woman who had run off with a priest, but, to top it all, his grandniece. In its irony this is almost like the reversal-scene of a Greek tragedy; the fall from grace could not have been any more striking. Life sometimes is stranger than art (for more on the historical basis see Ruffinelli, pp. 11–14).

### Analytical Overview

The story of the love-affair between Camila and Uladislao was a contentious one which reflected badly on an important figure of Argentina's republican history (Rosas) as well as the Church, and, for reason, although a short film had been made in 1912, 'every director since then had been forbidden to tell their story' (Stevens, p. 87). It was a result of Bemberg's extraordinary determination to tell Camila and Uladislao's story that the film finally came about. Intriguingly, *Camila* cost a mere \$370,000 to make (Bach, p. 23), which, by Hollywood standards (Simens), is a minuscule budget. And yet it became one of the best box-office hits of all time in Argentina; its sales in Argentina even surpassed those of *E.T.*, released in the same year (1983). Why was this so? It is important to bear in mind that – on one level – the film definitely panders to the popular taste – it has a good mixture of love, suspense, drama, death. Bemberg decided to emphasise the melodramatic elements of the original events of 1847–1848 in her film version. Her aim in filming *Camila*, as she pointed out in an interview, was as follows: 'I want a melodrama. I don't think it's a bad word' (Bach, p. 23). For that reason, as she went on to say, *Camila* 'was shot in a highly romantic style because I felt that in that way I could really hit the audience, in the heart and in the pit of their stomach. Melodrama is a very tricky genre, because at any minute it can turn into something sentimental, which I detest. So it had all those little tricks, such as the handkerchief, the gold coin, the priest who's sick with love, and the thunder when God gets angry. They're all like winks at the audience' (Whitaker, p. 293). It is easy to point to a number of stock melodramatic elements in the film, ranging from those mentioned by the director herself to the 'coup de foudre' when Camila takes off her blindfold and sees Ladislao's face, the dramatic discovery of Ladislao by Father Gannon in a 'pulpería' in Goya, the suspense when Camila is 'saved' when it is discovered she is pregnant, the suspense during the execution, and, most extreme of all, the voice-over when Ladislao's voice speaks to Camila from

3. *Camila*: Camila's Scream

beyond the grave ('a tu lado, Camila'; 'I'm beside you, Camila'). *Camila*, indeed, has all the hallmarks of what Warren Buckland has identified as the 'fallen woman melodrama', namely the melodramatic film which focuses on a woman who commits a sexual transgression, is expelled from the domestic space, and is eventually punished with death (Buckland, pp. 82–6). True to type in other ways as well, *Camila* is also, like many melodramas, based on an 'omniscient form of narration' (Buckland, p. 81). In his 1981 article, 'The "Force-Field" of Melodrama', Stuart Cunningham has argued that melodrama is best seen as a response to modernity and its shift from 'the traditional Sacred and its representative institutions (Church and Monarch)' to a new democratic society that is obliged to 'propagate the new "sacred" in purely ethical and personal terms' (Cunningham, p. 348). This is essentially the struggle which occurs in the film between Ladislao's more traditional notion of the Sacred (evident when he turns back to God) and Camila's own more subversive view of the Sacred which, for her, is tied to the personal, the erotic – love. As Ruby Rich has suggested, Bemberg used 'seamless art cinema (lush, transparent, and perfect periodicity) in the service of a new idea' (Rich, p. 286). *Camila*, indeed, offers a vivid contrast to Carlos Carrera's recent re-vamping of Eça de Queiroz's nineteenth-century story about a wayward priest in *El crimen del Padre Amaro* (2002); whereas Carrera's film offers a secularised, de-sensationalised version of a priest's peccadillo, Bemberg pulls out all the stops to underline the melodramatic, 'sacrilegious' nature of the lovers' crime.

### The Two Levels

*Camila* works on a number of levels. On its most obvious level – which coincides with its level as entertainment – the film is a tragic love story set in mid-nineteenth century Argentina. For the more perspicacious viewer, however, there are enough hints – and winks as Bemberg calls them – for the audience to realise that *Camila* also allegorises a particularly unpleasant slice of recent Argentine history, the Dirty War of the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, in which thousands of political subversives were captured by the authorities and 'disappeared'. Bemberg has pointed to the dual level of the film in interviews: 'It's a very Romantic story in which fear and menaces are also present, something which we've very much lived with in Argentina and it's there, just beneath the surface' (Torres, p. 78; my translation). It is in this sense that we can say that the politics of the Dirty War is encrypted within the narrative of love story set in nineteenth-century Argentina. *Camila*, as Ruffinelli has pointed out, is as much a modern woman as a nineteenth-century historical figure (Ruffinelli, p. 22). For contemporary audiences, indeed, the association between the two historical events was made crystal clear by the posters advertising the film which carried the caption 'Nunca más' (Never Again), the words used as the title of the official Truth Commission report on the atrocities of the Guerra Sucia (King, 'María Luisa Bemberg and Argentine Culture', pp. 23–4). The film was therefore clearly using the distant past in order to shape a vision of the recent past. As King suggests: '*Camila* and *The Official Version* also allowed the Argentine audience a form of collective catharsis, enabling them to experience, in public, emotions that had remained private during the years of the dictatorship. Over two million people wept at the story of Camila O'Gorman, which was their story' (King, *Magical Reels*, p. 96).

Bemberg chose certain details from the nineteenth century story and highlighted them since they worked well for her allegorising intention. Bemberg wished to present Rosas as a distant, unreachable figure; thus he is present in *Camila* via the letters he sends and, above all, in the portraits which adorn the Church and the Prison of Santos Lugares. It is significant that Rosas never appears in the film; he is all-perceiving eye, present in the portrait which 'watches' Camila when she confesses her sexual emotions in the confessional (she thinks it is Father Félix, but it is not), which 'watches' Ladislao when he gives his sermon, which 'watches' the jailer when he receives the letter which condemns Camila to death, despite her pregnancy.

Rosas is present also in Bemberg's shrewd portrayal of him in the 'divisas' (large ribbons) which the population are obliged to wear (Father Gannon obligingly places a ribbon on Ladislao's chest when it is discovered he is not wearing one), and, tellingly, in the emblems of Rosas worn on the chest by a number of the characters, notably the religious. Despite this overwhelming visual iconic presence, Rosas never once makes an appearance – not even off-stage – in the film. Bemberg chose this device in order to remind her audience of the sinister techniques of the Asociación Anticomunista Argentina which, unseen by its victims or their next-of-kin, 'disappeared' 30,000 people from 1976 until 1983.

In this way the melodramatic features of *Camila* have been modernised, and, in the process, given a harder political edge.

### Feminism

Bemberg once declared that she became a film director because she wanted to give women the chance to speak rather than be spoken for: 'My films are an attempt to make women recognise themselves and learn more about themselves through the protagonists' predicament. This is my ethical commitment, helping them to be free' (Graham-Yooll). This is very important because, in Bemberg's view, Argentina is 'one of the most *machista* countries in the world' (Bach, p. 27). 'Since childhood', she has suggested, 'I had felt a sense of frustration, a double standards between my brothers and I.' Her entry into the film world was 'a rebellion I had had since being a girl, and it manifested itself especially after reading Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*' (Bach, p. 22). So the film is itself a blueprint for Bemberg's own rebellion against her family, her society, and sexual oppression. *Camila*, indeed, like Douglas Sirk's early melodrama *All that Heaven Allows* (1953) develops a social critique of woman's place in society (Lehman and Luhr, p. 107), though it does so specifically by presenting a more positive view of womanhood than it does of manhood. It is true that Ladislao openly criticises the Rosas regime when Mariano, the bookseller, is murdered in his Church sermon, and he subverts the social order as much as she does when he runs off with Camila. Yet the film is very careful to point out that, of the two, Camila is the strongest. In her films, Bemberg had said that she wanted to 'propose images of women that are vertical, autonomous, independent, thoughtful, courageous, spunky', and this is certainly the case with Camila (Bach, p. 22). After all, it is she who is portrayed as initiating the love-affair in the film. Traditional versions of the story had an innocent woman seduced by a lecherous priest. 'I think it was a good idea to have the priest seduced by the woman', recalled Bemberg wryly. 'It helped me with the Church' (anonymous review in the *Daily Telegraph* [9 June 1995]).

Quite consistently throughout the film, Camila takes centre stage and thereby marginalises Ladislao (the acting performance by Susú Pecoraro, as Douglas suggests, is 'exemplary'; Douglas, p. 62). Bemberg's revision of the traditional melodramatic formula centres on the fact that Camila breaks the rules: 'Camila was a transgressor, she broke the received pattern of Argentina, not to mention feminine decorum. Not only does she enjoy a love-affair with her priest, but her action fought against the paternalistic order of family, church and state' (Bemberg interview: see Caleb Bach, p. 23). Camila is more independent-minded and rebellious. When push comes to shove, Ladislao turns to God. Camila, however, has nowhere to turn. When she discovers from the doctor that she is pregnant, we cut to a shot in which Camila is screaming through her prison bars to Ladislao that they have a child. The camera cuts to Ladislao's cell: we see him in long shot; he is hunched over, clearly oblivious to her words. Our sympathy is engineered for Camila during the prison sequences in that the microphone has been placed close

to her mouth: we hear her nervous breathing, we hear the water going down her throat – in cinematic terms we hear her body from the inside.

Camila's love is far stronger than Ladislao's because it is uninhibited by the confines of religion. Ladislao's love comes with strings attached, and there are indications of this early on in the love-affair: When the Easter procession goes past the lovers' house, Ladislao is visibly disturbed, yet he drowns his remorse in the passionate seduction of Camila on the kitchen table. This is, indeed, the most erotic love scene in the film (the earlier love scene which occurs in the curriage is delicate in its Flaubertian resonances). Ladislao's sexual love reveals itself to be a **substitute** for divine love. His Catholicism is always hovering in the background. As if to underscore this point, Ladislao becomes very lifeless at the end of the film, being almost reduced to a set of monosyllables (see Torres, p. 78). Camila, however, desperately wants to live, rejects the intercession of the Church, wants her baby to live, and yet, even so, she is executed. For this reason she becomes the tragic heroine of the film. Ladislao's is the necessary murder; Camila's the tragedy (Hart, p. 81).

*Camila* can be read – as we have seen – on the one hand, as a love story and, on the other, as a tale about nation-building in nineteenth-century Argentina (see Sommer for the use of this motif in the nineteenth-century novel), the clear implication being that the unborn child that Camila is carrying when she is executed allegorises the fledgling nation of the 'unitarios' mercilessly crushed by Rosas's iron fist. Superficially, the execution of the lovers would tend to suggest that the film is a maudlin lament on behalf of a lost political opportunity but it can be argued that the very presence of the voice-over ('A tu lado Camila'), which, as suggested above, is an overt allusion to a Romantic notion of post-corporeal love, itself suggests a transcendence of those powers which have crushed Camila's and Ladislao's vulnerable bodies. The film, therefore, has a positive political message. The way in which the film actually came into being points to not only its political resonance but also the sense in which its gestation period accompanied the birth of a new political era. As Lila Stantic recalls:

It's 2:30 in the morning and I'm with María Luisa (. . .) Marta goes off and comes back a few minutes later with the papers under her arm. In banner headlines all the papers proclaim: 'Argentina has invaded the Malvinas'. (. . .) We did not know that at this precise moment the right conditions were being created for María Luisa's third film, *Camila*. This is because almost all the critics agreed that in María Luisa's films to date (*Momentos* and *Señora de nadie*), there was no belief in the possibility of love. This *machista* interpretation of María Luisa's female characters led me, a few days later, to throw down the big challenge: 'now you have to do a love story. You have to do a love story. You have to tell the story of Camila O'Gorman.' (Stantic, p. 33)

The filming of Camila began – significantly enough – on 11 December 1983, that is the day after Alfonsín became the first civil president in almost a decade in Argentina (Ruffinelli, p. 11). Put in another way, it was the day on which Argentina emerged from the nightmares of the Guerra Sucia. This day also happened by pure

coincidence to be the anniversary of the day when Camila and Uladislao eloped (it was on the night of 11/12 December 1847). These omens were not fortuitous.

In this way, it is possible to argue that the film presents a positive ideological statement given the structural significance of its ending. The transcendence of death by virtue of love suggested by the voice-over must logically be seen as an allegory of the transcendence of the dirt of war through the hope inspired by the new democracy ushered in by the demise of the Guerra Sucia. Camila's child – the body of Argentina – dies in her womb but the voice-over of love ('a tu lado Camila') suggests hope for the future, 'another rhythm of breathing and loving' (Bemberg, p. 222).

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