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AN INTERVIEW WITH MARIA LUISA BEMBERG

ZUZANA M. PICK

Translated and edited by Julianne Burton-Carvajal

Maria Luisa Bemberg, born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1922, was in her late 40s when she began working in film, first as a scriptwriter for Raúl de la Torre’s Cronica de una señora (Chronicle of a Lady). After writing and directing two short features—El mundo de la mujer (The World of Woman), 1972, and Juguets (Toys), 1978—she directed her first feature, Momentos (Moments), 1981, likewise based on her own screenplay. In less than a decade, she then proceeded to release four important films—Señora de nadie (Nobody’s Wife), 1982; Camila, 1984; Miss Mary, 1986; and in 1990, Yo, la peor de todas (I, the Worst Woman of All)—establishing herself not only as the most important female filmmaker in Argentina, but as one of the most prolific and admired Latin American directors active today.

This interview, based on conversations that took place at the Montreal Film Festival in August 1991, upon the North American debut of her most recent film, focuses on the two period films, Camila and I, the Worst Woman of All.

Camila is based on the life and death of one of the few legendary females in Argentine history, an upper-class daughter of the prominent O’Gorman family, who, in 1848, at the side of her priest-lover and pregnant with his child, was executed by firing squad. Though her execution was against the law of the time, the dictator Juan Manuel Rosas, at the urging of Camila’s own pro-Rosas father, was unremitting in his pursuit and punishment of a couple whose affront to the church was also an affront to the established order. In its timing as in its choice of topic, the history re-presented in Camila called up profound reverberations in a national audience just emerging from seven years of authoritarian military rule.

Her contemporaries lauded Juana Ramírez de Asbaje as “the Tenth Muse” and “the Phoenix of America,” and—before taking the veil in 1668—she had enjoyed a dazzling interlude as a lady-in-waiting to the vicereine of the court of New Spain in what is today Mexico City. As Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a nun with the order of St. Jerome, her legendary wit and inexhaustible erudition guaranteed that she continued to be courted by a succession of viceroys and their retinues, holding a kind of salon behind the bars of the convent’s locutory. Her poetry and dramatic writing, on secular as well as sacred topics, was much in demand, and, under the auspices of the former Vicereine Countess de Paredes, two volumes of her “Complete Works” were published in Spain. Left unprotected by the court because of political instability, and increasingly the target of suspicion and resentment on the part of the fathers of the church, Sor Juana was pressured to relinquish her

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intellectual pursuits, forced to forfeit her library and her scientific instruments—both much-admired collections—and to formalize her repentance with a comprehensive confession she signed, in her own blood, “I, the worst woman of all.” Sor Juana, now widely recognized as one of the most brilliant poets and luminous intellects of her (or any) age, never again took up her pen. She died a few years later, at the age of 46, ministering to the victims of an unidentified but devastating plague that, perhaps mercifully, given the severity of her defeat at the hands of her religious “mentors,” carried her as well in its wake. Bemberg’s Yo, la peor de todas brilliantly synthesizes Mexican Nobel laureate Octavio Paz’s ambitious study of the writer, the works, and the world she inhabited, both on the margins and on the cusp of new enlightenment-informed epistemology.—JBC

Q: Two of your recent films have centered on female figures of great historical significance: Camila O’Gorman, a social rebel in 19th-century Argentina, and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a 17th-century nun who, writing from her Mexico City convent, became one of the most famous poets and thinkers of her day. The effort to retrieve such figures seems extremely important as part of a larger project for women and for feminism in Latin America.

A: Actually, my objective in making films about those two historical figures was not as grandiose as reasserting the importance of women’s role in history. After I finished Señora de nadie (1982), my producer, Lita Stantic, brought me a copy of Enrique Molina’s novel based on the life of Camila O’Gorman and said, “You should make a film about this as an answer to the critics who say that you are cold and distanced, that you are incapable of telling a real love story.”

I’m a person who loves a challenge. I decided to do Camila’s story as a “role reversal”: Instead of her being the passive girl seduced and virtually kidnapped by her lover, it seemed much more interesting to have her be the daring one. There’s an important subtext for me here, and that’s the incredible energy, courage, and imagination that women invest in love.

If only their world were a little more varied, how many things women could achieve in the areas of thought and creativity. If only what Byron said—that love is all of a woman’s life and only part of a man’s—were a little less true. There are obvious cultural reasons why, even today, many women’s lives are ruled by emotion rather than by thought. In Camila’s case, I feel that I did succeed in freeing her from the immanence in which historians tend to confine her.

Only later did I remember (and I add this to sound the encouraging note that all human beings are capable of evolving) that many years before, when working with Raúl [de la Torre] on Crónica de una señora, the actress Graciela Borges said to me, “What you should do is make a film based on the life of Camila,” and proceeded to tell me the story of the young aristocrat who ran away with a priest. Thoroughly conditioned by my Catholic upbringing and education, I said to myself, “A film about a priest who violates all the rules and forsakes his vows? Never!” That was in 1972. A dozen years later, I would find myself making the movie that Graciela had suggested.

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was not my idea either. I was having lunch at home one day when the telephone rang. It was my good friend Antonio (Taco) Larreta, a Uruguayan novelist and screenwriter who had almost collaborated on Camila, calling from Madrid to say, “I just read a magnificent book, Octavio Paz’s Sor Juana or, the Traps of Faith. Here is the protagonist of your next film.”

The book was such a hefty tome that I thought filming it was going to be too
much, too risky, but I devoured the book in a few days and called Taco to say how much I’d liked it. He was just finishing a job, so I hopped a plane to Madrid and we began work on the screenplay then and there.

So, you see, I didn’t choose either character as a result of some premeditated decision or a long search. But what I did with them once I chose them was what I would do with any historical figure, what I find most interesting: try to find their energetic, dynamic side. Octavio Paz’s approach to Sor Juana is refreshing because it’s so different from how others have written about her. Margarita López Portillo’s biography, for example, is very sentimental, arguing that Sor Juana entered the convent because of unhappy love affairs. Father Callejas, whose biography was written from Spain shortly after Sor Juana’s death, sees religion as Sor Juana’s only motivation and argues that toward the end of her life, she achieved true detachment from all worldly concerns. Paz’s perspective, which is historical, literary, psychoanalytical, and theological, is much more critical and much more modern. On my own, without his work as a guide, I would never have dared take on such an important historical figure, because I do not have the necessary credentials as a historian or a scholar.

The dream of every filmmaker is to find a character who is “larger than life.” There’s no doubt that Camila is a heroine within her context: She transgresses the boundaries of conventional behavior and she becomes transformed into a legend. Juana Inés de la Cruz is of another magnitude entirely. Looking at her from a 300-year distance, we can say that she was a genuine “Renaissance intellectual,” more genuinely “Renaissance” and a more genuine intellectual than anyone of her day. I honestly don’t believe that any other woman in history has matched either her immense learning or the obsessive scope of her intellectual quest. It’s a shame that there are so few genuinely outstanding women in our past and in our present.

In this sense, the Sor Juana project fits in with what I set out to do when I began to make movies—to change the very uninteresting image of women that film generally conveyed. When it comes to women, Latin American film is terribly poor and tendentious. Women are generally presented as a function of male ambition and are too often, even today, the object of a distorting, grotesque misogyny. Recent efforts by male directors to present women in a more favorable light still tend to restrict them to the erotic and/or the romantic; they are never really presented as beings with ideas. The ones who think, the ones who communicate, the ones who dream continue to be the male characters. At best, a female character might serve as catalyst so the male character can think, speak, act, and feel. To the degree that we women begin to speak about ourselves, male filmmakers will begin to realize how closed and negative their approach is, and only then will they begin to change it.

Some people may feel that my vision of Sor Juana is exaggeratedly feminist, but, as Paz’s book makes clear, she was herself an ardent feminist, though, of course, she would not have had access to the term 250 years before Virginia Woolf. The motivating drive of Sor Juana’s life, the reason she decided to become a nun, was the search for “a room of one’s own,” for the physical and ideological space to pursue her inexhaustible search for knowledge. Paz himself, in my opinion, has written a feminist text about the world’s first modern feminist writer.

Q: Was the Molina novel as formative of the Camila project as Paz’s biography was for the Sor Juana film?

A: No, the relationship is not nearly as close. On first reading, what I liked about the novel was the situation, the dramatic
elements; it was a kind of Romeo and Juliet of the pampas. I called Molina immediately, proposing to buy the rights, and he was delighted. I took the book with me on a vacation to visit friends in Greece, where Lita and I had the chance to go over the novel again. We both came to the conclusion that there wasn’t anything in the book that corresponded to the film we wanted to make—that, in fact, the novel’s vision was excessively mythic, and rather misogynistic. I had to tell Molina that I wouldn’t purchase the rights after all. Needless to say, he wasn’t pleased. After the film was released, he ended up taking me to court, arguing that I had stolen his ideas. For example, my film, like his novel, had the couple declaring their love for one another in the confessional. Of course! Where else were they going to manage to have an intimate conversation?

For all its aura of taboo, the case of Camila O’Gorman seems to have exerted a certain fascination on writers from the 1930s on, so Molina’s was not the first such treatment. The execution of Camila and her lover is a famous historical incident, a kind of emblem of the repressive Rosas regime under which they lived. Argentine history, and Argentines themselves, are very polarized politically: There are the pro-Rosas people and the anti-Rosas people, the Peronistas and the anti-Peronistas (and it wasn’t for nothing that Peron found a role model in Rosas!), the democrats and those who sympathized with the fascists in World War II. There was also a kind of xenophobic nationalism associated with the first Peronist regime that was very damaging to the country. The massive violation of human rights Argentina experienced under the military dictatorship of the 1970s and early 1980s has some of its roots in the Rosas regime. At one point in the film, Camila asks, “But are you going to kill me just like that, without giving me the chance to defend myself?” Here is an example of a human being who is totally abandoned, denied the protection of the law, a victim of the abuse of authority, an example as appropriate to our own time as to Camila’s. The urge to denounce this abuse of authority is a constant in all my films.

Fascism begins at home. It begins in the family, where the father believes himself to be the supreme power and authority and where the woman is relegated to the status of supplicant. Engels said it a long time ago: “In marriage, the husband is the bourgeois and the wife is the proletarian.” This first fascism is what later gets reproduced and perpetuated in other social structures. I am fascinated by transgressive personalities because I believe they are the essence of liberty. Camila was a transgressor; she defied nothing less than family, church, and state. And she defied the “father” within each of these: her biological progenitor; Monseñor Ortondo, the church father; and Rosas, the metaphorical father of the nation.

Q: When people think of historical themes, they tend to think of filmmaking on an elaborate, epic scale. As a woman and as a filmmaker, how do you feel about this association of the historical with the epic and the grandiose?

A: It leaves me cold. With the single exception of Kurosawa, I always find battle scenes a tedious bore. My approach is more impressionistic; all I need is a brush stroke here, a brush stroke there, to situate the viewer in the period. What interests me is the human beings, not the meticulous and obsessive reconstruction of facsimiles of their surroundings. Originally, I, the Worst Woman of All was to be shot in Mexico using outdoor sets. There was a scene in which the vicereine, with her maid-of-honor and her coachman, pass by in a carriage, followed by their escort of soldiers and a flock of Indian beggars to whom Her Highness tosses a few coins. I said to myself: Wait a minute!
How many times in how many films have we seen this exact scene? What does it contribute, aside from emphasizing the contrast between the abject poverty of the Indians and the unlimited wealth of the Crown? I knew that single brief scene would have taken two days to shoot, so I decided that this film would be done differently. The historical setting would be sketched in here and there; we would not attempt elaborate reconstructions.

What I saw very clearly when I visited Mexico was the competition that existed between the wealth of the church and the wealth of the Crown. Riches confer power, and power confers riches. So there is a lot of gold in I, the Worst Woman of All. There’s a scene in which the archbishop appears in front of a wall of pure gold; that’s my way of underlining the interconnectedness of wealth and power. Of course, this impression can also be conveyed through high angles and grand traveling shots of columns and cupolas, of that huge, hard, imposing proto-fascist baroque architecture whose bad taste only emphasizes the power to which it testifies. But why, when the gold backdrop is enough? For me, filmmaking is like poetry: Your quest is for the essence. You avoid dead time; you avoid small talk.

The most important thing for a filmmaker is to find the tone of the film you’re shooting. Once you’ve found it, don’t deviate from it. Like Bresson says, “More than directing others, what’s important is to direct oneself.” In filming Camila, I undertook to carry melodrama to its ultimate consequences. The tone is almost operatic, with lots of music and close-ups. I exaggerated these melodramatic elements as a way of winking at the viewer. In no way do I believe that melodrama is a “minor genre.” What happens is that people no longer know how to distinguish melodrama from soap opera, which for me is something else entirely. The risk implicit in melodrama is falling into a sticky sentimentalism I abhor, but genuine melodrama is very romantic, and I can’t think of a more romantic film than Camila.

Obviously, in a film like Camila everything is artificial, everything is an invention, but the film challenges the viewer to enter into complicity with its codes, to accept the codes as “truth” because only truth really moves us. For this reason, verisimilitude is important. In a Hollywood film, the house of an upper-class landowner like Camila’s father would look like Tara out of Gone with the Wind. In Argentina, the houses of the large land-owners of the period were surprisingly modest. They were small, and often made of adobe. I was delighted with the country house we found for the Camila shoot. I think these are the kind of elements that lend an air of truth to the story, though maybe I’m too concerned with artistic direction. This is one of the “deformations” of my upbringing, because I was raised in a very privileged environment, surrounded by beautiful things. We scoured the antique stores for lovely little objects that we placed here and there on the set of Camila. Whether or not the viewer consciously registers them as the camera pans back and forth doesn’t matter; their presence enriches the film.

In the case of I, the Worst Woman of All, I wanted to avoid anything that smacked of Mexican folklorism, because I was determined to emphasize the universal over the local. The theme of obscurantism is not specifically Mexican; nor are the themes of repression and misogyny limited to the 17th century. So I decided I needed to create in the viewer the sensation that we are 300 years removed in time but that we could also be here, today. I needed to emphasize power, opulence, force. That’s why I thought of the association with fascism. But, on the other hand, I wanted Juana’s cell to be like a round prison, as if it were the equivalent of her own head, like a labyrinth that surrounds
her with books, a kind of half-jail, half-refuge. I also counted on that magical, glacial light that Felix Monti, my director of photography, would provide. Everything is in tones of blue and grey, except for the vicereine, who is the only one who has a little color, because she's the one who has a child.

I did something similar in the color scheme of Miss Mary (1986). When they asked me what color I wanted the flowers to be for this scene or the other, I said: I don't want flowers, I don't want color of any kind. I wanted everything beige, grey, white, like the music of Dianti that permeates and expresses the enormous melancholy and frustration of that family portrait.

So when it comes to my personal filmmaking style, I think it depends on the story I want to tell. The challenge with Sor Juana was to stick to that minimalist, abstract, conceptual tone, without deviating from it. In I, the Worst Woman of All, everything is unreal but everything is true, and that's what matters to me: the truth.

Q: Do you think that the expectations of the European and North American viewing publics—that Latin American cinema must be raw and immediate and therefore cannot by definition be carefully crafted and refined—have acted as a brake on the international distribution of I, the Worst Woman of All?

A: I'm not sure, really. I think this film inhabits a world of ideas, and what most draws American audiences are action films. I'm well aware that the Sor Juana film is not a mass-audience vehicle like Camila. I was pleasantly surprised by the warm response it got in Argentina, which makes me celebrate the high degree of intellectual development of the Argentine people. Given the dire economic realities in Argentina when I, the Worst Woman of All was released, it did much better than I had hoped. On the other hand, the truth is that everywhere the film has been shown, it has had an enthusiastic response from audiences. Distributors, of course, are another matter. Camila was more fortunate. It was the first Argentine film ever seen outside the limited circle of art house cinemas on the East and West Coasts; it was screened all over the United States. People who are honest about it acknowledge that Camila opened doors for the international distribution of Argentine film.

Q: By positing Sor Juana as a universal figure, don't you think there's a risk in removing her from her specific national context?

A: I chose to deemphasize that national context, in part because Mexico at the time Sor Juana lived was not a nation in the modern sense, but rather New Spain, a loyal colony of the mother country, so Sor Juana's world was not confined to Mexico but rather extended to the entire Spanish-speaking, Catholic world, and potentially beyond. Sor Juana was a product of colonialism. I think the impact of colonialism is very palpable in the film—the power of the viceroys, their paternalism, and how very unprotected Sor Juana finds herself when the viceroys depart. This reality is shared by all Latin Americans, because we are all liberated former colonies of Spain. Likewise, the weight of the Catholic church, so powerful and such a negative force in all of Latin America. But I like to think that Sor Juana is more than Mexican, more than a Spanish colonial subject, more than Latin American, that the wings of her spirit transcend all borders.

Notes

1 Juan Manuel de Rosas ruled from 1829 to 1852.

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