

# Three Films of María Luisa Bemberg: A Female Gaze

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## *Abstract*

*Three films by María Luisa Bemberg (Argentina, 1922-1995) present alternative views of Latin American women. Strong female protagonists act to forge their own destinies as they search for identity and purpose from within a culture dominated by a patriarchal Church and State. Scrutiny of the costs and consequences of the characters' choices serves to promote critical thinking and cultural understanding objectives for Christian liberal arts students.*

María Luisa Bemberg (Argentina, 1922-1995) was a remarkable storyteller who chose the medium of film to image the efforts of her female protagonists toward liberation from oppressive social constraints. Bemberg's passion was to tell stories of women to women in Latin America and the wider world; the filmmaker often articulated her personal and artistic agenda, which was, in her own words, to "propose images of women that are vertical, autonomous, independent, thoughtful, courageous, spunky. . . I am going to try to tell 'that which to me has not been told'" (she quotes cinematographer Robert Bresson here); "I am going to tell it with the point of view of a woman, with female protagonists, a bit like a promise to my own gender."<sup>1</sup> In this way Bemberg offers alternative models of women to Latin American viewers. For María Luisa, strong female protagonists tend to be transgressive (her choice of adjective); that is, these women simultaneously transgress and transcend the lines drawn for them by tradition, society, and the conventions of culture. In their search for alternatives to the traditional

values which restrict women to the home, to the convent, or to marriage, Bemberg's women explore options for which they pay dearly.

For Christian foreign language educators (particularly teachers of Spanish) it is a worthwhile endeavour to scrutinize Bemberg's films, not only for their cultural significance but also to discern and critique the reality that Bemberg portrays. Leland Ryken asserts that "The creative artist's vocation is to stare at the created and human world and to lure the rest of us into a similar act of contemplation;"<sup>2</sup> and he charges us with the following: "The task of all Christians is to discern and evaluate the perspectives that artists offer for their approval whenever they read or look or listen."<sup>3</sup> Ryken reminds us that "The doctrine of common grace asserts that God endows all people, believers and unbelievers alike, with a capacity for goodness, truth, creativity, and so forth. All truth is God's truth. It is not suspect if it happens to be expressed by non-Christian artists."<sup>4</sup> While one would not call María Luisa Bemberg a non-Christian artist, given the Roman Catholic identity which she claimed, neither would one call her an evangelical artist. However, one can find in Bemberg's films markers or images of the search for truth which will not only enhance students' understanding and appreciation of Latin American culture and history, but also challenge them to re-assess conventional cultural notions regarding Otherness, difference, and gender roles. Most importantly, critical analysis and discussion of these films will lead Christian viewers to confront "the thorny issue of trying to distinguish inessential social norms from theologically valid norms that rightly limit us."<sup>5</sup>

Marjorie Agosín, Bruce Williams and others have identified a particular way of seeing as "the woman's gaze"<sup>6</sup> or "feminine optics."<sup>7</sup> This approach asks "What does the female director look at through the camera?" as well as "What do female characters see in their particular vision of reality?" We can extend this question to the spectator as well: "What does the female spectator regard when viewing the film?" This notion of gaze reminds us of Ryken's statement about the artist's vocation to stare at the world and to lure the rest of us into similar contemplation. María Luisa Bemberg's films furnish bold visions of women who look, question, and search for truth and meaning. Using this notion of "the gaze" as a theoretical framework, I will discuss three of Bemberg's subtitled films, easily available in this country for purchase in VHS format, that are worth sharing with students.<sup>8</sup> These films are the famous *Camila* (1984), *Miss Mary* (1986), and Bemberg's final film, *De eso no se habla* (1993).

Each one of these films features female characters who dare to defy convention by asserting their right to see what is there, to decide their own destiny, and to live with the consequences of that choice. Each film is set within a recognizable Latin American context so that the films serve as images of historical and cultural realities which are of interest to our curriculum. And the scrutiny of these films in successive order provides us with varying representations of women who are willing to take risks and pay the price of seeking to discover who they are, what the world is like as opposed to what the world should be, and what their role as agents of self-determination and of change in that world might be.

*Camila*, a well-elaborated period piece, is a film of choice for use in the classroom given that it depicts a historical event during the repressive dictatorship of Rosas in the mid-nineteenth century;<sup>9</sup> it tells a riveting, passionate story (based on historical fact<sup>10</sup>) about a strong young woman who falls in love with an admirable young man who also happens to be a priest. (This film earned an Oscar nomination for best foreign film in the mid-80s.) *Camila* O'Gorman is a woman like Bemberg: both are from the privileged class of European extraction; their families belong to the oligarchy and are very wealthy; but in spite of these material resources *Camila* feels trapped by the expectations of family (specifically her father), the Church (as it is unlawful for priests to marry), and the State (the Federalistas, Rosas' party, promote a strong link between the government and the Catholic church; their repressive censorship inhibits intellectual and artistic expression and forces the exile of many intellectuals). *Camila* is a free spirit who loves life, learning, and the exercise of her imagination. She is inspired by her paternal grandmother, La Perichona, who lives in perpetual house arrest on the family *estancia* or ranch for having engaged years ago in an affair with the monarchist viceroy Liniers; she is also inspired by the bookseller Mariano, who slips her forbidden books such as writings by the exiled Esteban Echeverría - an *unitario* (or liberal) who has fled for his life to Uruguay. Most of all, *Camila* is inspired and inflamed by the young priest Ladislao Gutiérrez, in whom she sees a distillation of nobility of spirit and passion for justice. For *Camila*, Ladislao is much more worthy of her affections than is the wealthy, bland and autocratic man whom her father wishes her to marry.

Early in the movie, a notable scene depicts Ladislao's outraged sermon after Mariano the bookseller is assassinated by the Santa Federación (the military police) on the very doorstep of the church; the viewer will

note the presence in this scene of Camila's family and father and of the ubiquitous despot Rosas in his portrait. As the camera closes in on Ladislao, who is preaching the Beatitudes with authority and conviction, the viewer will understand why Camila falls in love with him; the camera highlights the fixed gaze of Camila, lingering on her face; the melodramatic closeup privileges her regard. Shortly after this scene occurs another in which Camila declares to her sisters her aspirations for marriage, which contrast markedly with her sister's focus on herself and her newly-won status of being engaged ("Estoy de novia" / I am engaged). Bemberg privileges Camila's voice, as Camila declares, "lo importante es amarse mucho, mucho, mucho ... Yo quiero otra cosa [que el mejor partido de Buenos Aires]; alguien diferente; alguien de quien pueda sentirme orgullosa; sí, sí, orgullosa. Quiero poder salir a la calle y quiero poder gritar su nombre, y quiero poder decir, Éste es mi marido, y gritarlo ..." (What is important is to love each other very, very much ... I want something else [other than the best match in Buenos Aires]; someone different; someone of whom I can feel proud; yes, yes, proud. I want to be able to go out on the street and I want to be able to shout his name, and I want to be able to say, This is my husband, and shout it ...). Camila's values focus on the character and inner qualities of her ideal husband: love, mutuality, integrity, respect, openness. The irony for Camila is that she will indeed choose a partner of nobility of spirit, but whose status as priest forbids this desired openness; this choice of the forbidden will result, predictably, in tragedy.<sup>11</sup>

Eventually Camila and Ladislao embark upon a relationship which goes beyond that of the confessional; the camera signals the societal barriers limiting Camila in a fleeting shot of her window, as a pensive Camila is depicted through protective wrought-iron bars. The scene following this one shows how Ladislao sees Camila, through another barrier, this time of the confessional grate: viewers note that Bemberg chooses to highlight Camila's eyes and mouth through the diamond-shaped opening of the confessional window, signalling again the importance of the woman's gaze as well as the woman's voice. An innovative reversal here is that Camila, the woman, takes the initiative in "declarándose" or declaring herself to Ladislao, as she confesses her love for him. Camila hence becomes a sexual subject, or agent, rather than an object acted upon by a man.<sup>12</sup> The viewer must realize that, ironically, even as the camera privileges Camila's gaze, Camila herself is staring not at Ladislao's face, but at a small dark opening in the confessional grate, behind which Ladislao listens and watches. (That

small dark opening is representative of the dark journey upon which Camila embarks as she pursues her attraction for the forbidden object of her love.) Replacing visual contact with tactile, Camila reaches out and caresses the grate with her fingers as she confesses, thus resisting the barriers that embody the social controls prescribed by the Church, the family, and the state.<sup>13</sup> Such agency is enacted further on in the movie as Camila follows Ladislao up to the bell tower and all but offers herself to him; when he asks, in exasperation, “Camila, ¿qué voy a hacer contigo?” she answers, “Lo que usted quiera”,<sup>14</sup> whereupon he sweeps her into his arms for a passionate kiss.<sup>15</sup> The diaphanous natural lighting in this scene from the windows in the bell tower creates an ironic and deceptive luminous glow which seems to almost sanctify the moment, transgressive as it is; yet Camila’s black dress in this scene (she is in mourning for the death of her grandmother), as well as the blackness of the priest’s robes, foreshadow the tragedy which will end their love affair.

Predictably, Camila and Ladislao run away together; they “marry” under assumed identities and start a school for poor children in the remote province of Corrientes; eventually they are discovered and imprisoned<sup>16</sup>, and executed by express order of Rosas himself, with the encouragement of Camila’s father, to whom the family name is more important than the life of his daughter. The execution takes place even though Camila is pregnant, and supposedly Argentine law forbids the execution of pregnant women.<sup>17</sup> Ladislao and Camila are buried together in a common coffin. The relationship between the lovers ends as it began: Camila was blindfolded with a white handkerchief when she first met Ladislao at her birthday party, during a game of blind man’s bluff; and at the end, as the couple faces the firing squad they are blindfolded again, this time with black cloths. To a postmodern viewer, these blindfold props may suggest the power of the woman’s gaze, the threat that this subversive gaze implies to a patriarchal society, and ultimately, the consequence of woman’s looking: she will pay dearly for daring to stare and to act in resistance to the norms of Church, state and family. In contrast, a more conventional viewer might interpret the blindfolds as representing the characters’ willingness to blind themselves to the moral consequences of their choices: the virginal white of Camila’s birthday-party blindfold belies her romantic pursuit of a lover who is entirely inappropriate for her; the black blindfolds of the execution scene reflect the fatal outcome of such blatant disobedience. — *Camila* was a blockbuster success in Argentina; the public resonated with its mes-

sage of rebellion against tyranny, especially given that when the film was released Argentina was just emerging from the dreadful Dirty War of 1976–1982 during which time the military dictatorship persecuted the Argentine public to the extent that an estimated 30,000 persons disappeared without a trace, and over 300 children born to these detained persons were kidnapped (a case study is detailed in the film *The Official Story / La Historia Oficial*, by Luis Puenzo, Argentina, 1986).

Beyond considering the meaning of the woman's gaze when studying this film, students could also be encouraged to consider the power of the woman's voice as well as her silence. Camila runs great risks by daring to express her thoughts and feelings; in this she is following the lead of her grandmother and her own mother. The precedent established by the grandmother's own history and her collection of love letters, the mother's quiet courage in speaking the truth at relevant moments, and Camila's choices to read even censored books and to hear the truth that Ladislao preaches, all underscore the power of the word in determining destiny.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, students could be encouraged to critically examine the type of spirituality that seems to pervade the film: the role of the Scriptures preached by Ladislao and quoted to him by his spiritual director; Ladislao's struggle of conscience and his impassioned prayer scenes both before and after the elopement; the couple's good works of establishing a free school for peasant children in Corrientes; Camila's frequent attendance at mass, her offerings for the poor, her desire to conceive a child as a sign of God's forgiveness, her final confession and the "baptism" of her unborn child — all could be analyzed to consider the nature of the faith that is imaged in the film. This faith is simultaneously sincere, deeply ingrained, and flawed: it is a spirituality based on relativistic responses to individual circumstances and emotions, rather than a martyr's faith based on obedience and fidelity to unchanging moral principles and biblical values.

Bemberg's next film, *Miss Mary* (1986), is the most autobiographical of all her works, and in some ways reverses the role of the female protagonist in that, contrary to Camila, the British governess Miss Mary is the voice of repression, of control, of order and maintenance of the patriarchal status quo. This film depicts the period in Argentina from 1930 to 1945, which coincides with the director's childhood. The political story is that of the military dictatorship of General Uriburu, who overthrows, with the support of the upper class, the democratically elected president. The abuses to the populace, the fraud, and the repression which occurred over the course

of these years led to the rise of Peronism, and the movie ends with the advent of Perón to the leadership of the country (and Miss Mary's return to England); this change in leadership signals the beginning of the end for the conventional aristocratic oligarchy in Argentina.

The personal story in this film is that of the upper-class Argentine family, the Martínez-Bordagáin (modeled after Bemberg's own family of origin), and the children's relationship to their British nanny, Miss Mary (played by Julie Christie), who has been hired to teach the children English, manners, and religion; and most of all, to educate and control the two daughters, Carolina and Teri. The gaze or perspective which is featured in this film [and not admiringly], is that of the tourist and even colonizer, in Miss Mary, who never assimilates to the culture and who, like the British Empire, imposes her culture upon the "colony" of the family whom she serves, and their many servants. Miss Mary refuses to learn Spanish; she requires children and servants to address her in English; and most tellingly, she writes untruthful letters home to her mother telling her how warmly she has been received by the family and welcomed into their lives. The reality lived by this family is that of separatism, snobbery, elitism, obsession with appearances, and most of all, of emptiness and vacuity. Bemberg herself commented, "I grew up in a family very like the ones I depict - blind and deaf to the changes in the world like the Russian Revolution and the New Deal. My mother lived a frustrated, aimless life. Through my feminism, I am trying to avenge her" (quoted in Williams, p 184)<sup>19</sup>. The mother-character in the film, Mecha, is a beautiful but remote figure, who has a "little crying room" to which she retreats when she is sad (that is, when her husband is unfaithful to her, which is not infrequently), and who spends her time playing on the piano, over and over, a melancholy, haunting piece by Satie; often Mecha wears large dark sunglasses, suggesting the social blinding of her gaze (that is, her disempowerment) and signalling her identity as a beautiful object whose function is to look good for her husband and to reproduce upon demand.

An often-commented scene in this film features Carolina, the older daughter, when she begins having menstrual periods. This sort of event is not often, if ever, depicted in movies, and Bemberg was especially proud of it, not only for its innovativeness but also because it relates an incident which occurred with her own sister.<sup>20</sup> In this scene Carolina is elated to discover that she has become a woman, and she proposes that they have a party to celebrate. Miss Mary, however, squelches her joy by telling her

that she is “unwell”, that she will not be permitted to go out for a week, and that one must not mention this incident in public. Viewers will note how the camera slowly moves in on Carolina in the bed, as Miss Mary leans over her, signalling the gradual stifling and suffocation of this vital young girl by societal expectations and the “qué dirán” (what will people say).<sup>21</sup> Behind the camera, Bemberg chooses to illuminate this scene with contrasts: the very white, even glowing bedsheet stained with a bright streak of blood is supplanted by the dimming of lights as Miss Mary comes in to change the linens and to put the girls to bed, which signals the tension between the young girls’ innocence and their impending loss of purity as they move out into the wider culture. Christian viewers may associate the blood on the sheet with the image of the biblical pure-white lamb whose innocent blood is shed in expiation for the sins of many; all rites of passage (whether physical or spiritual) come at painful cost. Here, Carolina’s blood on the sheet foreshadows her future mental anguish, even as Carolina’s gaze - her view of life - has begun to be distorted by the conventions of society. This scene demonstrates just one step in the progressive repression of Carolina, who ends up spending her days obsessively typing out pages from the telephone directory to keep herself busy, as a “cure” for her kleptomania (this activity was in actual fact a therapy prescribed by a psychoanalyst for a personal friend of Bemberg’s).<sup>22</sup>

In this film, not one of the women characters achieves wholeness (not the sisters, not the mother or grandmother, certainly not Miss Mary); and only one female character seems to achieve any satisfaction and joy out of life; that is the upstart and rather vulgar widowed neighbor, an ex-manicurist from the lower classes, who makes her fortune by marrying a sugar-daddy much older than herself — again, a transgressive woman. The other women characters, all from the privileged class, must pay for their transgressions: Teri is forced into an unwanted marriage for losing her virginity to a boyfriend; the grandmother ends her days obsessively perusing ancient photographs of friends and loved ones, dividing them into piles of “muertos” (the dead) and “vivos” (the living); Mecha, the mother, plays the piano, cries in her “little room”, and does periodic good works (such as arranging church weddings for long-standing common-law liaisons, as well as baptisms and first communions) for the peasant workers and their children on the family ranch; Miss Mary is dismissed from her job when she sleeps with Johnny, the oldest brother of the family. Less compulsive than the women in this film, the father and Johnny both question the need to fire the



governess; but Mecha insists that for the sake of appearances the dismissal must take place. One critic has suggested that Miss Mary takes on the role of the tragic figure in classical Greek drama: "it is, ironically, the virtues of which she is most proud that are the grounds for her downfall."<sup>23</sup>

In viewing *Miss Mary*, which is rich in cross-cultural (and neo-colonialist) implications, students could be challenged to scrutinize issues such as the education of the young: what are children, particularly girls, taught to see and to not see?; what are the consequences in adult women of this formation?; the perpetuation of the double standard in machista society (Johnny's imposed rite of passage could be compared to Teri's, and the respective consequences of each analyzed), the nature of religious education (the film opens with a nanny putting the young sisters to bed and saying prayers with them; Mecha sponsors yearly First Communions and weddings for the ranch hand families), the cross-cultural experience lived out by Miss Mary<sup>24</sup> (what does she know or care about the contemporary political context of military coups, the Spanish civil war, World War II or the rise of Peronism? much less the quality of life of the family's town servants or farm workers); how is Miss Mary a cultural "other"?; how does the imposition of English upon the children render them cultural "others" within their native country?; the ambiguous social status of the governess and what it reveals about gender, class and power;<sup>25</sup> the almost inevitable descent of female characters into mental illness.<sup>26</sup> On a personal level, students could be asked to reflect on aspects of their own spiritual formation, and to consider what events and teachings (whether inadvertent or otherwise) have contributed to their view of God and to their individual faith story. The broader issue of how sane and effective cross-cultural ministry can be distinguished from cross-cultural colonialism could be explored as well.

Given that *Miss Mary* is supposedly autobiographical of María Luisa Bemberg's life, we can conclude that Bemberg's role-models of health while growing up were scant if not invisible. It seems rather that Bemberg, through the creative work of filmmaking, has developed and discovered progressively stronger female role models in the writing and production of her own film scripts. That is, for Bemberg, scriptwriting and filmmaking seem to serve as a sort of redemptive therapy; as she, the director, gazes upon her own life in the *Miss Mary* film, and as she gazes upon the lives of female protagonists from history (such as Camila or Sor Juana<sup>27</sup>) or fiction (Charlotte in *De eso no se habla*), Bemberg seems to move toward projected images of female strength, resistance, resourcefulness, and meaning

— protagonists who, though not always victorious or even justified in their particular quest, still display valor in the search; in the retelling of the stories of these women, Bemberg seems to refashion her own story, and to offer a model for viewers of women who are proactive, tenacious, and courageous in the face of adversity, and who struggle, in the end, with the costly consequences of their decisions to deviate from societal norms.

Bemberg's last film, *De eso no se habla* (*I Don't Want to Talk About It*) (1993) is also the work with whose protagonist Bemberg herself most closely identified,<sup>28</sup> as well as a film in which spectators' notions of difference and otherness are overtly challenged. Charlotte is a dwarf, whose self-acceptance and curiosity about the world continually frustrate her over-protective mother Leonor, who wishes to raise her daughter in complete blindness to her difference; for Leonor, Charlotte's dwarfness is a source of shame and something to be denied and certainly not mentioned: "de eso no se habla" (of that one does not speak). The contrastive gazes featured in this film are those of two women: the mother chooses to blind herself to reality; the daughter chooses to see what is there. The consequences of these choices play out in the characters' behavior: Leonor seeks to manipulate her environment to reflect the illusion that her daughter is physically normal, while Charlotte inhabits her small body with serenity. The humor generated by these contrasting perspectives creates a warm and accessible fable of manners set in provincial Argentina during the 1930s, leading to an open-ended ending: in an ultimate act of recognition of who she is (but at the cost of abandonment of husband and mother), Charlotte celebrates her difference and creates community for herself by joining the circus in the company of not only other dwarves, but also other representatives of difference (gypsies, clairvoyants, animal-trainers, clowns, physical mutants). In this way the film may be said to have an ending in the spirit of Bakhtin<sup>29</sup>, whose metaphor for heteroglossia, or the joyous expression of multiple voices, was the carnival or circus, the place for laughing celebration of difference, of plurality, of diversity. However, Christian viewers will recognize the cruelty inherent in gentle Charlotte's rejection of her family, and will identify with critics who name violent, divisive, mocking laughter for what it is.<sup>30</sup>

The conflict depicted here is a take on the timeless question of appearances and illusion versus reality. Much of the humor of the film is derived from the mother's fanatical devotion to the "qué dirán"; her answer to this social question is permanent silence in the form of pretending

that her daughter's difference does not exist. Leonor spends her life in the quest to make her daughter appear "normal" or tall, and to train Charlotte in the womanly pursuits of speaking French, playing the piano, and horseback riding. Initially compliant, naturally curious, with eyes wide open, Charlotte soaks up all opportunities for learning and for new experiences. A scene in this movie echoes the famous jury scene of *Yo la peor de todas* (*I, the worst of all*), the story of the precocious 17th-century Juana Inés (who would become Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz): Charlotte, perched on a table in her mother's general store, regales a group of gravely attentive older men with tales of far-away places of which she has learned in her encyclopedic studies. There is no question she cannot answer, no riddle she cannot solve. The female voice is privileged and authoritative; in this film, furthermore, the difference of gender is weighted by the added difference of the grotesque, resulting in a protagonist of savant-like qualities who subverts conventional notions of beauty, authority, and normality.<sup>31</sup>

The story-line of the film traces Charlotte's development from compliant child to independent adult, in the tradition of the *bildungsroman*; some critics prefer to see Charlotte's evolution as circular rather than linear.<sup>32</sup> An early indication of the girl's independence is when she changes her own name from Carlota to Charlotte, a first step toward assuming control of her own identity and personhood. Charlotte extends this power to her mother's servant-boy, an orphaned Arab, by articulating for him the truth about himself. She corrects her mother: "él es Mohammed, no 'Mojamé'; es con 'd', no con 'jota'; él es árabe." (He is Mohammed, not 'Mohamé'; it's [spelled with] a d, not a j; he's Arabic). Leonor, focused on doing rather than being, answers: "Lo que sea; que se mueva" (Whatever he is, he should move it!). The boy himself responds uncertainly, "No sé lo que eran mis padres; yo soy Mojamé" (I don't know what my parents were; I am Mohamé). This ambivalence is mitigated by the film's end, when the narrator of the film (who has been present from the beginning in voice-overs) reveals himself as "yo mismo, Mohammed Ben Alí, maestro de escuela y fiel testigo" (I myself, Mohammed Ben Alí, schoolmaster and faithful witness), testifying to the story's veracity. Mohammed's friendship with Charlotte has led him to himself: to his name, origin, and identity: a teller and teacher of truth. Charlotte's clear-eyed vision of herself has led him to open his own eyes to reality. Mohammed finally accepts himself for who he is: a fellow minority, another type of grotesque or abnormal figure: an orphan, an alien, a Muslim Arab in a Catholic community. This accep-

tance of identity may be what gives Mohammed the courage to find his place within this community, in which he is so obviously different. Viewers will consider the irony in Mohammed's choice to stay within the village in which he is so alien; this choice to stay with those who have raised him, and to reconcile himself to the community, is more courageous than Charlotte's own ultimate decision to abandon her home and family of origin in favor of joining the circus where she fits in with others like herself.

Throughout the film Charlotte stubbornly refuses to play her mother's games of attempting to hide her daughter's dwarfness; Charlotte is intent on cultivating her own view of herself. The film opens with the male narrator informing us that "everything began in front of a mirror." We see Leonor arranging herself with makeup and jewelry in preparation for her daughter's birthday party; we intuit that this character will define herself by appearances. This supposition is borne out in the subsequent scene in which Leonor rejects connectedness with the mother of a deaf girl, who extends solidarity to her: "Yo te entiendo; somos madres elegidas; teníamos que estar más cerca" (I understand you; we are chosen mothers; we should be closer). Leonor, mute, walks away, thus embodying her life philosophy of "de eso no se habla" and of blinding herself to the truth. The mirror motif appears again in a later scene in which Leonor catches her daughter dancing to the "Habanera" of Bizet's *Carmen* before a mirror, dressed up as the transgressive figure of the title role. The camera lingers on Charlotte-Carmen as she gazes at her costumed, small self in the mirror, displaying her red dress, her high heels, her swaying body, her pleased smile; the scene signals that this young woman will, as subject and agent, choose her own destiny by exploring a variety of roles and lifestyles; she will not be constrained by conventional expectations.<sup>33</sup> Charlotte's mother rushes in, turns off the music, and bangs the door as she exits. She begins to weep when the music comes back on; mother and audience realize that this scene prefigures the daughter's emancipation as much as it does the mother's loss. We see further indications of the protagonist's movement toward independence and agency in a subsequent scene: after Charlotte finishes a piano recital, she hops off of the piano bench and comes forward to take a bow before her enthusiastic audience in defiance of her mother who has instructed her to preserve the illusion of height by remaining on the bench during the audience's applause. Charlotte seems to be practicing for a life-role as a whole being, an actor or Subject who chooses for herself, and who is at the same time secure enough in who she is to enjoy and receive the gaze of

others, to accept herself as Object of regard.

Perhaps it is this secure dual identity as both Subject and Object, which empowers Charlotte to agree to marry a man much older (and much taller) than herself. Ludovico himself embodies difference: he is a foreigner, a wanderer, an exotic and worldly newcomer to the village; he entrances Charlotte and Mojamé with his tales of the Wild West and Buffalo Bill, of the North Pole and Amundsen, of Samarkand and Tamerlane, of Granada and Boabdil. In spite of his power, age, and wealth - or perhaps because he is, like Charlotte, comfortable in his own skin - Ludovico does not dominate Charlotte, either before or after marriage; he respects and accepts her. The image of tiny Charlotte riding astride a large white horse is what ultimately leads Ludovico to fall in love with her; their wedding, full of comic turns, culminates in a tender scene of Ludovico waltzing with his bride in his arms, supporting her as if a baby, her white train flying about their single silhouette.

The conventional security of marriage, however, cannot withstand the allure of spectacle for Charlotte, who must continue to exercise her dual role and identity as Subject and Object. When the circus, a carnivalesque amalgam of diversity, comes to town, Charlotte recognizes others who look like her: other dwarfs, other prototypes of the grotesque. She finally sees herself physically reflected in the bodies of others, and this reflection proves too compelling to resist. Her long-held desire to see the world, as well as a perhaps latent desire to experience community with others who are physically like her, is fulfilled at the end of the film when the circus comes to town, and Charlotte recognizes others of her kind in the cast of entertainers.<sup>34</sup> The final scene is of Charlotte riding out of town on her white horse in the circus parade, while her forlorn mother bars herself permanently behind the shuttered windows of her home, never to appear in public again. Bemberg thus subverts the traditional image of the knight on the white horse who rides in to save his lady: here the lady, completely self-possessed, rides away from home into the horizon of possibility, leaving behind husband, mother, and all the trappings of convention. The post-modern heroine abandons the center in favor of exploring the margins; likewise Ludovico spends the rest of his life wandering around the world, following circuses and contemplating his beloved from afar. In contrast, Charlotte "has found her place in spectacle"<sup>35</sup> and has fulfilled the prophetic vision she had of herself as she gazed in her mother's mirror.

Bemberg's gaze takes a radical turn in this final film as she sub-

verts the traditional notion of the female ideal by presenting her heroine as a dwarf, whose “beautiful mind, personal creativity, and strong will transcend the limitations of her own body as well as the expectations of society.”<sup>36</sup> Charlotte has made herself free to traverse the horizon, as Bemberg seems to invite us the audience to do: the final shot of the circus caravan trailing over the empty horizon suggests, according to a rather typical postmodern critic, “that the only course is to go beyond the horizon, to transgress past and place and to create a completely different world from the one which we now inhabit.”<sup>37</sup> The presence of a rainbow framing this caravan scene lends a seductive note of hope and promise to the ending.

Christian viewers, while applauding the themes of diversity, truth-telling, and responsibility for one’s self in this film, will question the ethics of choice which surround its ending. Ludovico, however much older than his bride, is a faithful and compassionate husband; does Charlotte act rightly in abandoning him for the sake of finding herself? Bemberg dedicates her film to “all those who have the courage to be different in order to be themselves”. Students could be challenged to debate questions such as: When does the journey in search of one’s true identity transgress the lines of responsibility to others and of keeping commitments? Who is ultimately the more ethical character in this film: Charlotte or Mohamé? And not least, does Charlotte’s final choice negate the truth-telling she has modeled up to this point? The open-endedness of this film may be happy for Charlotte, and perhaps for Mohamé, but not so for the protagonist’s mother and husband. Viewers must consider the consequences and costs of independent choices for themselves as well as for the characters through whom they live vicariously in works of fiction. In scrutinizing these films by María Luisa Bemberg, as well as with any film we view, Christian spectators are called to confront Ryken’s challenge “to discern and evaluate the perspectives that artists offer for their approval”.<sup>38</sup> In bringing biblical values to bear on how we consume and interpret works of art, we will ourselves exercise that clear-eyed gaze to which the filmmaker studied in this paper claims to be committed.

Reflecting a postmodern idealism, Bemberg has stated: “As creative women we want an art that includes all existence, desire and dreams — an art that no longer excludes and marginalizes, that leads us into the center where difference is abolished to reveal a dazzling and new humanity”.<sup>39</sup> Bemberg’s final film presents a pseudo- Bakhtinian vision of the celebration of this “new humanity”: a universe in which the “different” have

autonomy to speak with their own voice and to forge their own destinies — regardless of the fallout left in their wake. María Luisa Bemberg died in 1995 of cancer, having lived for 73 years but still at the peak of her career. She left a body of scripts and films that foreground women; for Bemberg, each film was “a formidable exercise in self-knowledge ... [and] I said to my own sex, to my beloved sisters, here are four films each with questioning women. Here are examples by which to model your own identities.”<sup>40</sup> Christian viewers are charged to look for the redemptive in all films; particularly in Bemberg’s, we catch glimpses of the search for meaning, for freedom, for identity, for truth, however mediated such truths might be by cultural relativism and the director’s agenda. We also see how suffering (at times innocent, at other times deserved) accompanies this search. Bemberg’s protagonists, like each one of us, long to see and to be seen; to know, and to be known; to live actively as subjects and agents of destiny, as well as with a serene capacity to receive and enjoy love, desire and commitment. As we encourage our students to identify in Bemberg’s films examples of these universal and God-given traits, and to evaluate the choices made by the director and by her characters, we provide students with opportunities to articulate a Christian world view, to become aware of their own inner “map of reality”<sup>41</sup> and to develop their Christian minds with informed hermeneutical skills.<sup>42</sup> We invite students to participate in the interpretive community of Christologically-focused consumers of film, to exercise biblical stewardship over their minds, and to become informed and redemptive participants in the great cultural conversation of the age, as well as effective ministers of justice and of grace.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Caleb Bach. “María Luisa Bemberg tells the untold.” *Américas* 46 (Mar/Apr 1994) : 20-7.

<sup>2</sup> Leland Ryken, in “The Creative Arts”, *The Making of a Christian Mind*, ed. Arthur Holmes, Downers Grove IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985, pp. 105-129.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 125

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 129

<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to the editor of this journal, David Smith, for this comment offered to me during the revision process of this article.

<sup>6</sup> Bruce Williams, “The Reflection of a Blinded Gaze: Maria Luisa Bemberg,

Filmmaker", in Marjorie Agosin, Ed.: *A Woman's Gaze: Latin American Women Artists*. Fredonia NY: White Pine Press, 1992, pp 170-190.

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Grant, "Intimista Transformations: María Luisa Benberg's First Feature Films", in John King et al, Eds.: *An Argentine Passion: María Luisa Benberg and Her Films*. London: Verso, 2000, pp 73-109.

<sup>8</sup> It is essential that instructors preview these films prior to usage in the classroom; some contain scenes that may be offensive to sensitive viewers.

<sup>9</sup> I use this film to illustrate the reality of political and cultural repression under Rosas' regime, as we discuss the short story "El matadero" (written 1839, published 1871) by Esteban Echeverría, in the Survey of Spanish-American Literature course.

<sup>10</sup> see Donald F. Stevens, "Passion and Patriarchy in Nineteenth-Century Argentina: María Luisa Benberg's *Camila*", in *Based on a True Story: Latin American History at the Movies*, Donald F. Stevens, ed., Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 1998, pp 85-102.

<sup>11</sup> Both Camila and Ladislao face with courage their punishment, which is execution by firing squad. They do not shrink from the consequences of their choices, but go to their deaths with dignity, which behavior is consistent with Benberg's depiction of each as desiring to inspire righteousness in the other.

<sup>12</sup> Laura Mulvey posits classical cinematic gaze dynamics as active for males and passive for females; "traditionally the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen" (p 63 in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, Sue Thornham, ed., New York University Press, 1999, pp 58-69). Barbara Morris points out that "el cine femenino" (feminine cinema) seeks to change the traditional relationships between subject and object, in "La mujer vista por la mujer: el discurso filmico de María Luisa Benberg," in *Colección Mujeres de Palabra # 2*, Adelaida López de Martínez, ed., Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1995, pp 253-267.

<sup>13</sup> Katharine Jenckes, "Identity, Image, and Sound in Three Films by María Luisa Benberg." In *Cine-Lit III: Essays on Hispanic Film and Fiction*, George Cabello-Castelet et al, Eds. Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1998, pp 61-67.

<sup>14</sup> "Camila, what am I going to do with you?" - "Whatever you wish."

<sup>15</sup> An interesting feature of Benberg's work is that her camera never exploits the woman sexually by photographing female nudity; she prefers to focus on women's faces; rather, in an ironic reversal, what infrequent nude



scenes Bemberg does include in her work – and they are tastefully presented – focus on male nudity rather than female: again we see the privileging of the woman's gaze, rather than the man's.

<sup>16</sup> The integrity which initially attracted Camila to Ladislao is evidenced in the fact that the renegade priest does not flee when he is given ample opportunity to do so. Rather, Ladislao awaits capture with resignation, telling Camila, "ya no puedo con Él" (I cannot resist Him any longer).

<sup>17</sup> A poignant scene preceding the execution depicts the unborn baby's baptism: as Camila receives the last rites from her confessor, she drinks from the vial of holy water; according to Catholic doctrine, this rite will ensure the salvation of the baby's soul.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Curry, "La estructuración del discurso fílmico en *Camila* de María-Luisa Bemberg: 'filtros'". *Letras Femeninas*, 18, (1-2), 1992, pp 11-23.

<sup>19</sup> Bruce Williams, in "The Reflection of a Blinded Gaze: María Luisa Bemberg, Filmmaker." Marjorie Agosín, ed: *A Woman's Gaze: Latin American Women Artists*. Fredonia, NY: White Pine Press, 1998: 171-190.

<sup>20</sup> Julianne Burton-Carvajal, in "María Luisa Bemberg's *Miss Mary*: Fragments of a Life and Career History." Robin, Diana, and Ira Jaffe, Eds.: *Redirecting the Gaze: Gender, Theory and Cinema in the Third World*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999, pp 331-351.

<sup>21</sup> Bemberg herself explained, "This [incident] is how I discovered that female modesty means concealing what happens to us"; quoted in Burton-Carvajal, *op. cit.*, p 348.

<sup>22</sup> Bruce Williams, *op. cit.*, p 184.

<sup>23</sup> Currie K. Thompson, "The Films of María Luisa Bemberg and the Postmodern Aesthetic." *La Chispa '95: Selected Proceedings: New Orleans and Louisiana Conference on Hispanic Languages and Literatures*. Tulane University Press, 1995, pp 367-376.

<sup>24</sup> Mark D. Szuchman, "Depicting the Past in Argentine Films: Family Drama and Historical Debate in *Miss Mary* and *The Official Story*," in *Based on a True Story: Latin American History at the Movies*, Donald F. Stevens, Ed., Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 2001, pp 173-200.

<sup>25</sup> Alberto Ciria, "History, Gender, Class and Power in the María Luisa Bemberg's Films." *Revista Interamericana de Bibliografía; Inter-American Review of Bibliography*, 45, (1-2), 1995, pp 147-160.

<sup>26</sup> "Do you think we are mad? Do you think we have too much money?" are questions asked more than once by the young sisters of *Miss Mary*. The relationship between wealth and madness is a provocative open question in this film.

<sup>27</sup> See Bemberg's 1990 film, *Yo, la peor de todas (I, The Worst of All)*, an account of the life of the 17th Century Mexican nun, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648-1695). Bemberg's script is based on Octavio Paz' massive and authoritative biography: *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, o, Las trampas de la fe*, 1982. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1990.

<sup>28</sup> "No, no, I'm Charlotte. Charlotte's a metaphor for anybody that's different: a dwarf, black person, young homosexual, even a big, fat, ugly woman, who like anyone else has the right to a place in the sun. I was different from my brothers and sister. I was a subversive, a dreamer, and probably a filmmaker since I was a little girl. What surprised me was that I never suspected I could have some artistic disposition." María Luisa Bemberg, in Caleb Bach, *op. cit.*

<sup>29</sup> Gatto, Katherine Gyekenyesi. "De eso no se habla: María Luisa Bemberg's Postmodern *Tour de Force*". *West Virginia University Philological Papers*, Morgantown WVa: 45, 1999: 75-81.

<sup>30</sup> Averintsev, Sergei. "Bakhtin, Laughter, and Christian Culture." Felch, Susan M. and Paul J. Contino, Eds., : *Bakhtin and Religion: A Feeling for Faith*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, pp 79-95.

<sup>31</sup> "And what is subversive about the grotesque is its power to reassess the center and the margins. Bemberg's protagonist is subversive, not by the mere fact of being a dwarf, but by virtue of her refusal to consider her 'difference' from the norm as deformity... Charlotte's subversive power stems from her affirmation of her own grotesqueness." Bruce Williams, "Dwarfing Difference: Deformity at the Threshold of the Visible", *Canadian Journal of Film Studies / Revue canadienne d'études cinématographiques*, 8, (2, fall) 1999: 44-55.

<sup>32</sup> "...the flow of Bemberg's narrative rejects linearity or phallogentrism (a unitary drive toward a single, ostensibly reachable goal). Rather, the protagonist Carlota moves from the periphery" [with her abnormal status as dwarf] "into the center" [with the conventional act of marriage] "and ultimately back to the periphery" [with her final subversive act of joining the circus and abandoning her husband and mother]. Katherine Gyekenyesi Gatto, "De eso no se habla: María Luisa Bemberg's Argentine Postmodern *tour de force*." *West Virginia University Philological Papers*, 45 (1999), pp 75-81.

<sup>33</sup> Bruce Williams (1999) sees Charlotte's mirrored gaze as "an assertion of her dual positioning as gaze object and sexual subject" (p 50).

<sup>34</sup> "Carlota's stages of redefinition of the self, implied in the name change to Charlotte, her use of languages and music, and the use of mirrors to convey the idea that the self is always finding itself through reflections (mimesis), show her evolving from a marginalized figure into an accepted

wife, and once again returning to the periphery as a circus performer." Gatto, *op cit.*, p. 80.

<sup>35</sup> Thompson, *op. cit.*, p 73.

<sup>36</sup> Kathleen Newman: "'Convocar tanto mundo': Narrativising Authoritarianism and Globalization in *De eso no se habla*." John King, et al. eds., *An Argentine Passion: María Luisa Bemberg and Her Films*. London and New York: Verso, 2000, pp 181-192.

<sup>37</sup> Newman, *op. cit.*, p 187.

<sup>38</sup> Ryken, *op cit*, p 125.

<sup>39</sup> Bemberg, in King et al, eds., 2000, p 223.

<sup>40</sup> Bach, *op cit*, p 27.

<sup>41</sup> Ryken, *op cit*, p 105.

<sup>42</sup> "As [Christians] assimilate works of art, ... they should self-consciously assess the adequacy of artistic pictures of the world in terms of a Christian framework. The central tenets in that world view are the existence of God and an unseen spiritual world, the worth of physical reality, the value of the individual person and social institutions, the fact of human evil and fallenness, the availability of God's redemptive grace, and a view of human history as being under God's purposeful providence and headed toward a goal." Ryken, *op cit*, pp 121-22. See also Alan Jacobs, "Bakhtin and the Hermeneutics of Love," Felch, Susan M. and Paul J. Contino, Eds.; *Bakhtin and Religion: A Feeling for Faith*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, pp 25-45.

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