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MARIA CANDELARIA (1944)

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OVERVIEW

María Candelaria is the tragic story of an innocent young indigenous woman who lives in the floating gardens of Xochimilco, which is now in the southern reaches of Mexico City. María Candelaria is a beautiful, innocent young woman, but she is shunned because her mother was (so they said) a prostitute. The people who are most condemnatory are sniping, critical, judging women. The film has been revered as a gorgeous tribute to Xochimilco, indigenous culture, and the tragic history of the conquest and indigenous peoples. The film is also a searing indictment of the artistic and socio-political "indigenismo" movement. Instead of improving the life of young indigenous women such as María Candelaria, or their hard-working and loyal indigenous husbands, the artists and politicians who embraced indigenismo appropriated it to use in their art, or to advance their political ambitions. With its romantic and idealizing cinematography, Maria Candelaria is one of the treasures of Mexican cinema's Golden Age.

CHARACTERS

María Candelaria: Beautiful and pure indigenous flower seller
Lorenzo Rafael: Maria Candelaria's indigenous fiancé
El Pintor (The Painter): A famous painter who wants to paint Maria Candelaria
Lupe: Jealous woman who spreads rumors in the town
Don Damian: The town's "big boss"
Reporter: Tells the story in a kind of frame tale

THE STORY

The film revolves around the fate of Mexican indigenous lovers Maria Candelaria and Lorenzo Rafael.

A Portal to the Past. The film begins as a famous painter is asked by an art student to see a nude painting he has never displayed publicly. The artist agrees, but states that the painting caused a scandal which resulted in "a tragedy".

Maria's parentage: Maria Candelaria is a beautiful indigenous whose mother was, sadly enough, a prostitute. Even though Maria Candelaria is absolutely innocent, she is ostracized by the entire village because of her mother and her mother's profession.

Dreaming about her wedding: Lorenzo Rafael and Maria Candelaria dream about getting married by a friendly priest in the village after Maria's piglet grows up, so she can sell it for money to purchase a wedding dress.

The Floating Gardens: There is a rather jarring juxtaposition of the cruel and treacherous townspeople, and the incredible beauty of the idyllic aquaculture landscape of the area outside Xochimilco, Mexico in the very early 1900s, and the beautiful and innocent unconditional love of another young indigenous man, Lorenzo Rafael.

Lust: The Big Boss has his eye on her. The rich "cacique" (big boss) and monopoly storekeeper of the indigenous village, Don David, is covetous of Maria Candelaria, and wants to use the fact that she owes him a modest sum of money to force himself on her. He uses his

influence with the townspeople to block her from being able to raise the money she owes by selling her flowers in the town marketplace.

Spotted selling her flowers in a new market: When she and her fiancé, Lorenzo Rafael are forced to sell flowers and vegetables in the nearby Xochimilco marketplace, Maria Candelaria is seen by the then young painter from the opening scene.

The painter's request: The painter tells her that he wants to use her as a model for his paintings of indigenous themes, but the young woman declines. She is modest and does not want to be portrayed in a way that would bring shame to her pueblo.

Evil Deed: One morning, Don David goes to her mini flower farm and shoots and kills Maria's piglet.

Bitten, followed by Sickness: On a moonlight canal boat outing with Lorenzo Rafael, Maria Candelaria is bitten by a mosquito and later contracts malaria. It is useful to note that whenever a person is bitten by something and the proceeds to become gravely ill, it has a literal denotation, but is always and extended metaphor.

Desperate for life-saving medicine: Only Don David carries the quinine that the Mexican government has entrusted to him for the care of the whole village. When she gets gravely sick, Lorenzo Rafael tries to purchase the quinine she needs to save her life from Don David, only to have him threaten to kill him.

A Theft to Save a Life: In desperation, Lorenzo later breaks into Don David's company store and steals the quinine and a wedding dress. The painter learns of Maria Candelaria's illness and with the help of the friendly priest, brings a doctor to cure her. Maria Candelaria and Lorenzo Rafael are then married by the priest. Maria now feels obliged to pose for the painter who helped save her life.

The Painter's Desire: When the painter expresses his wish to paint her in the nude, she refuses in horror to disrobe for the painting and runs away, and the painter uses another model as a body double.

Arrested: Meanwhile, Lorenzo Rafael is arrested and sentenced to jail for the theft from Don David.

Gossips: On an errand to Xochimilco, one of the women from the town goes to the painter's house and sees the finished nude painting with Maria Candelaria's face and tells of the disgrace to the whole village.

The Wages of Gossip: The townspeople then pursue her through the streets and stone her to death, and she dies in the arms of the escaped Lorenzo Rafael.

THEMES

Virtue: Maria Candelaria is filmed in ways that echo the Virgin of Guadalupe, and the ways she wears her rebozo over her head even further reinforces that visual suggestion.

Sacrifice: With Maria Candelaria the verge of dying, a desperate Lorenzo Rafael breaks into a store and steals medicine (quinine) and a wedding dress for her. He sacrifices his freedom in order to save his fiancée, and to help her achieve her dream.

Scheming: The lecherous town bigshot, Don David, has designs on her. He uses everything he can to force himself on her. She does not succumb. So, he manages to entrap her in debt, and also to block her from selling her flowers in the local marketplace.

Gossip and Rumor-Mongering : Lupe, one of the sniping, gossipy townswomen, sees the painter's completed work and tells everyone about the fact that it is of Maria Candelaria, and the body is unclothed. She reminds the townspeople that Maria Candelaria is the daughter of a prostitute. So, they claim the picture is bringing shame on the village. So, they find Maria Candelaria, chase her through the streets, and then stone her to death.

Exploitation: The artist acts in his own selfish interests and exploits Maria Candelaria. When she refuses to pose in the nude, he finishes the canvas, not with a modestly clad woman in embroidered finery, but with a different model's nude body.

Cultural Appropriation: The artist's painting of Maria Candelaria in her traditional clothing, celebrated indigenous culture and beauty. At the same time, it reinforces the sense of loss and gives the reins of power to the artist (and also to those who are documenting the issue).

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Maria Candelaria As the daughter of a prostitute, living in the same tiny pueblo where the mother lived, Maria Candelaria has a social stain that no amount of virtuous living will wash off. Nevertheless, she endeavors to be good, pure, hard-working and honest, and she upholds the ancient traditions by raising flowers in the chinampas, the floating gardens, of Xochimilco.

At heart is the issue of powerlessness, and María Candelaria has no power. She is literally delegitimized as a person when she is scorned because her mother was a prostitute, and even the other indigenous women turn on her.

Ironically, the painting that the artist made, even as it celebrates indigenous culture and beauty, in reality, reinforces the sense of loss and gives the reins of power to the artist (and also to those who are documenting the issue). Watching what happens to María Candelaria is beyond painful – and, knowing that the same story, writ large, is what happened to all the indigenous, is obvious. However well-intentioned *indigenismo* might be, it does not do anything to restore self-determination.

Parallels John Steinbeck wrote "The Pearl," which was set in the fishing village of La Paz in Baja California, Mexico. In that novella, a hard-working indigenous inhabitant of the town is robbed, and then also falsely accused. Steinbeck wrote extensively to promote a socialist political agenda in California. However, he exploited the subjects by taking their stories, sentimentalizing and exaggerating them, and objectifying them, converting them into a dehumanized "Other." This is most particularly the case in *Grapes of Wrath* where he paints a rather gruesome picture of Oklahomans (that he refers to with the despicable term, "Okie") fleeing the Dust Bowl to arrive in the promised land of California only to literally die of hunger.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1:

After the Mexican Revolution (1910 – 1920), there was a movement that embraced indigenous roots (rather than simply privileging European / Spanish roots) and promoted the cultural heritage. In theory, the idea was to preserve and protect the indigenous cultures, and to provide more education and opportunities to them. Describe how the Painter in the film ("El Pintor") uses Maria Candelaria in the service of this goal, but instead of helping her, it hurts her.

Question 2:

The "floating gardens" are the "chinampas" and they were the ancient form of aquaculture. The chinampas consisted of artificial islands in the middle of the canals, and the Aztecs would grow corn, beans, beets, cilantro, radishes, and tomatoes. They also grew flowers, such as marigolds (*cempasúchitles*) and other flowers. María Candelaria grew flowers to sell, and she had a small

boat adorned with flowers that she used for selling it. Describe the scenes in the movie that show her in the floating gardens, and describe the placement of the boat, the water, and the flowers. What does the mise-en-scene suggest about Maria Candelaria's connection to earth? How does it suggest a disconnectedness from the rest of the world?

Question 3:

When Don David does not get his way, he goes to Maria Candelaria's farm and shoots and kills the piglet. He also threatens her with debt. Describe the way that Maria Candelaria has treated the piglet, and her efforts to protect it (include the blessings for small animals at the church). What might the piglet represent besides simply a farm animal?

Illustrative Moments:



This long-shot introduces the artist, his studio, and a group of individuals who want to know about the history of the painting of Maria Candelaria. This first scene establishes the story; the fact that the viewer cannot see the painting adds a sense of mystery. It also immediately visually suggests that Maria Candelaria is an object, and thus objectified, and an entity without any self-determination or agency. Immediately, the suggestion is that the individuals with agency are educated, "blancos" or white (Spanish descent) class.



Many of the long shots are low-angle, which gives a sense of the way that nature, history, and Maria Candelaria converge. Here, Maria Candelaria collects flowers in the “chinampa” (floating gardens) of Xochimilco, on the edge of Mexico City.



Maria Candelaria transports her flowers that she has cultivated in the chinampa across the lake to the market where she sells them. This long shot places her again in a context of nature and historical traditions that date back to the Aztecs. She rows the canoe, emphasizing the fact she is of indigenous origin.



Maria Candelaria in a medium close-up, shot from below, with the sun from the heavens illuminating her face. This is a characteristic shot of Maria, which creates the visual suggestion of the Virgin Mary, and of purity of heart.



This scene depicts the local religious event, "Blessings for the Little Animals." The townspeople are clumped together to give the impression of a mob, incapable of undifferentiated thought or action.



Maria Candelaria is close to death as she lies on a woven mat (petate) that emphasizes that she is indigenous, as does the fact that she lies under a woven shawl (rebozo). She is in desperate need of medicine, but because she owes Don Damian a great deal of money that she had planned to repay through the sale of a piglet (which he killed), her fiancé makes the decision to steal the medicine (and risk jail).



Lorenzo Rafael, jailed for the theft of medicine, receives a visit from Maria Candelaria. The lighting illuminates their face, and brings to mind paintings of saints from the Renaissance or the Baroque.



The townspeople run through the narrow alleys at night, carrying their flaming torches above their heads. This scene, shot from above, reinforces a sense of panic and impending horror.



The dramatic chiaroscuro of this scene creates an emotional response in the viewer, as does the long shot, and the view of the back of the individuals. The birds swirl while the bell tolls; it is announcing Maria Candelaria's death by stoning.



Maria Candelaria lies in her coffin, surrounded by flowers that refer both to her work in the chinampas cultivating flowers, and also the famous image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, who was viewed by a desperately poor and ill indigenous person immediately after the Conquista. The halo of flowers, the lightly crossed hands, and the draping of the cloth of her dress also suggest a religious painting, particularly one of the Mexican Baroque, where syncretism (a fusion of indigenous beliefs and Catholicism) resulted in uniquely beautiful artisanal work in the churches and cathedrals.