

## *Lorenzo's Oil* (1992): Cinematographic overview

José Aijón Oliva and Valentín Salazar Alonso-Villalobos<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Departamento de Obstetricia, Ginecología y Pediatría. Facultad de Medicina.  
Universidad de Salamanca (Spain).

Correspondence: José Aijón Oliva. e-mail: [pope@dadaplay.com](mailto:pope@dadaplay.com)

Received 15 January 2004; accepted 25 February 2004

### Summary:

*Lorenzo's oil* is a movie that adapts itself perfectly to the script paradigm promulgated by Syd Field: a structure of three acts with a trigger in its planning, an easily distinguishable first plot point, a midpoint in its core, a clearcut second plot point and a climax in its unravelling.

This film, which could have been no more than a "movie star vehicle", offers quite a lot of interesting details such as some subplot, certain symbolisms, some well-defined characters, some camera movements... However, it also has certain shortcomings as for its screenplay (which sometimes falls into an easy sentimentalism).

The movie offers an approach and a quite simple explanation to such a little-known illness as ALD. Nevertheless, in the picture the disease is just a dramatic device to present us a family that suffers and fights against all kinds of barriers.

*Keywords:* *Lorenzo, Adreno-leukodystrophy, ALD, Oil, Salvation.*

### Technical details

**Title:** *Lorenzo's Oil*

**Country:** United States

**Year:** 1992

**Director:** George Miller

**Music:** Samuel Barber, Vincenzo Bellini, Gaetano Donizetti and Gustav Mahler

**Screenwriter:** George Miller and Nick Enright

**Cast:** Nick Nolte, Susan Sarandon, Zack O'Malley Greenburg, Maduka Steady...

**Runtime:** 129 minutes

**Genre:** drama

**Awards and nominations:** Oscar nomination for best actress (Susan Sarandon) and Oscar nomination for best original screenplay.

**Synopsis:** Lorenzo is a charming and full-of-life boy; their parents are very proud of him. But the happiness of the family will be broken when Lorenzo (Zack O'Malley Greenburg) begins to lose his audition progressively in both ears; his legs and arms also lose their force and, very soon, his body is affected by paralysis. Doctors diagnose him ALD (adreno-leukodystrophy), an uncommon and incurable disease and they foretell the child just one year of life. Augustus

(Nick Nolte) and Michaela (Susan Sarandon), their parents, refuse to accept it and they begin a terrible fight against time and against conventional medicine, a fight that will demonstrate that, if it is really desired, everybody can be able to achieve a miracle.

### Cinematographic overview

This movie is quite well adjusted to the canonical law of plot points: the first one (disease diagnosis) takes place at about minute 16 of the movie; the second one (attainment of the new oil) takes place at about minute 105, and the climax (Lorenzo manages to move a finger) is at minute 122, just before the end of the movie, and with no time for an anticlimax that would have been completely unnecessary.

The film begins with the use of a quite frequent resource: a quotation (in this case the lyrics of a song) that has something to do with the plot, although at first it doesn't seem so. In the end, some overprinted sentences tell us what is going to happen afterwards. Such a beginning and such an ending show us that this story has not ended yet. The end is approaching, but it is as if it was going back to the beginning; it is like a spiral.

The most prominent element of the opening in the Comoras Islands, is the story of the kites. Lorenzo has drawn himself and his family on a kite to be given to his friend Omouri (Maduka Steady). It is not casual that they are kites, since these toys have many times been used to mean longing of flying or of touching the sky. This statement is reinforced when Susan Sarandon's character, in one of its few weakness moments, says "if this is unbearable for you, fly to the arms Christ-child's arms". On the other hand, we will also see heavenly vaults in some temples, and the boy is also passionate with astrology (at the beginning of the film and later during San Lorenzo's night). Therefore flying or the sky are advanced as an escape way for what is going to happen (figure 1).



Figure 1: Lorenzo and his kites

In this prologue Lorenzo is portrayed as a cheerful, sincere, nice boy who is full of vitality. So we understand that the function of this opening is to show us the situation before the disaster, and to begin growing compassion in the audience.

When they return to Washington, we discover what the movie is actually going to be: Lorenzo goes to the background, and little by little there appear the characters that will work for his (sometimes physical, other times spiritual) salvation. Michaela's character is presented like a determined woman, while Augustus is a quite topical Italian character (as for the fact that he is a "winner", his eating likes, customs...). Later we will focus on the development of the characters. There is a very attractive and strained way to expose the symptoms of the disease: Lorenzo's character is developed in hardly ten minutes in which his falls, changes of humour and crises are shown. It is necessary to keep in mind that once he begins to suffer the illness, the boy seems to be in the background because what really matters is what he is suffering.

From this moment on, the images we will see of Lorenzo will be quite hard and difficult to bear for the audience.

In the first forty minutes of the movie the director outlines an authentic visual exercise thanks to the use of the camera: he shoots almost everything in close-ups and "aberrant" shots (with the camera bended or diagonal). He also makes many camera movements: he often opens up and closes the zoom, and he also makes many crane effects (filming from a crane with the possibility of aerial displacements that it allows).

Inclination is also important: there are many dive shots, but there is a really beautiful zenithal one (or "great dive"). Twelve minutes later, Susan Sarandon is shown praying in a church. The camera catches her in zenithal and she looks right towards the camera. This shot places us again in the point of view of God, looking from the sky to a mother begging for her son's health, and you would have to be thick-skinned not to be on her side when you see that expression (figure 2).



Figure 2: Zenithal shot of Susan Sarandon

The information about the ALD is given in a dosified way along the movie, although it is not always comprehensible for the audience.

The first time they speak about the illness, at the doctor's office, the conversation is shot in a classic shot-intro-shot, although it is interesting when the parents are focused in the doctor's background. On this occasion the doctor is serene so the explanation can be followed without difficulty; on the other hand, the mother is paralyzed and affected (which is very credible) whereas the father is not understanding anything.

When the library research begins, a quite usual and effective trick is used to create distress:

detail shots of unconnected words. Words are underlined that catch the attention of the audience: blindness, deafness, death... and at the same time many technical words as “dysphagia” appear.

Later, a more complex explanation begins, what has a negative effect on the common moviegoer’s interest. The scene is especially dramatic in which the doctor tells the parents that the disease is hereditary and transmitted by the mother: this detail makes Michaela blame herself and it makes her fall into a crisis that makes her break up with everything.

The scene at the Faculty in which more data on the illness are provided and there is talking about the therapy is quite shocking due to Lorenzo’s looks. Obviously it is another trick of the director to provoke even more compassion in the audience than they have already felt. Is it necessary? Let us say that at least it is elegant...

Anyway, there are two scenes in which it is very simple to understand what they are really doing:

The first one is that in which Nick Nolte proposes the example of the sinks. This is the scene that an average viewer specially remembers when he or she talks about this movie (figure 3).

The second one is at the library, in which Nick Nolte appears making long chains of fats with clips. Both scenes are meant to be justified by the assumption that it is the character’s practical way of thinking, but in fact they have a highly explanatory function for the watcher.

In many occasions we have the feeling that the suffering of Michaela is basically based in that this was her only chance to have a son. That is why, when Omouri appears, it seems that he will fill the handicapped son’s gap.

This movie has a main plot that consists of the search of a cure for Lorenzo, and it is a plot of

those called “ascent and descent”. Obviously we are referring to the continuous ups and downs of the story. It is built on a single narrative outline: peak, recession, depression, recovery, peak... that is constantly repeated. Happiness is shown in the Comoras Islands, then Lorenzo begins to have problems, the diagnosis is made, the oil is found, it reduces his fat levels, the descents become stagnant, there is a psychic crisis, a new formula appears to cure Lorenzo, the new oil works...

We could point out four sub-plots: the relationship among the Odone and Michaela’s sister, the relationship between the Odone and the Foundation for ALD Research and the doctors, the search of information, and the relationship between the couple. The first and the fourth ones are the less developed ones, and they only become patent in certain moments of the story, having a very simple solution. As for the second one it is, obviously, a learning plot with a fundamental weight in the story. Nevertheless, the most interesting is the third one, which we could identify with “beneficent intruder” sub-plots, since the couple enters a world that is absolutely foreign to them in order to improve it and to contribute solutions. At the beginning nobody is on their side, but their progresses make them get more supporters little by little. The fact that the members of the foundation eventually come on the Odone’s side against the presidents and doctors is something we could term “necessary justice” (figure 4).

The profiles of both characters of the couple are very complementary: when the spirit of one of them decays, the other lifts him/her up; it happens constantly. Except for the beginning and the ending of the movie, it all consists of a character carrying the other one on. The differentiating shades are that Susan Sarandon’s character is more impulsive (she

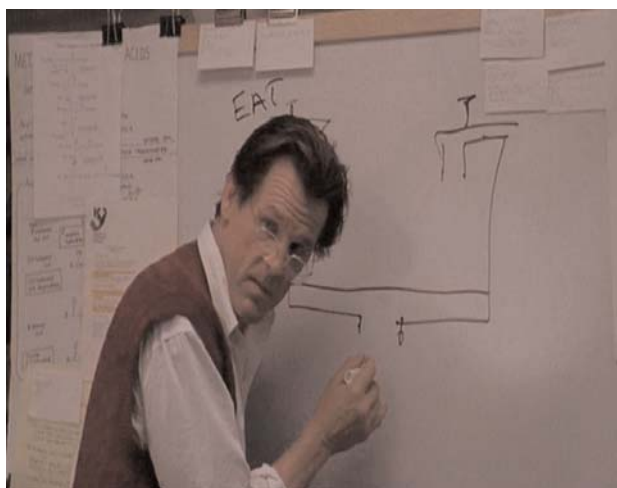


Figure 3: Nick Nolte proposes the sinks example



Figure 1: Lorenzo with a nasogastric probe



fires the nurse), she expresses her feelings better, she releases her rage (she hits her husband)... while Nick Nolte's one is shyer (he needs to speak in Italian to say what he feels), and colder (he only cries once, and it seems to be due to madness rather than to sadness). It is curious to see how they hold on to their past in order to head on to the future: they decide to study how they did when they went to the Comoras; they take up their research after eating a tasty salad... Perhaps they hold on so much to the past because they fear their future. Together they form a great team in all fields –it becomes patent in the dialogue they have with the managers of the Foundation when they have dinner together. It seems as if an ideal character had been built and it had been divided in two parts...

The movie has many valuable aspects (as those mentioned before with regard to the use of classical music as an expressive and narrative resource), but it also has certain mistakes:

Some dialogues are rather implausible and forced. We notice that the creators did not want to place so much emotional load on a character, so they resourced to add some of them that do not have much reason of being.

In the second part of the movie there is some abuse of the fusion to black. It is true that it is a good resource to express the passage of time (it would have been enough with the overprinted titles) and anguish, but so many fusions end up by tiring the audience and they show off little imagination.

The rhythm falls in many moments, which may also be tiresome for viewers.

Some of the actors' faces and gestures make the picture look like a vulgar TV film about a sick boy with two star-actors as its main characters. In many occasions it does not contribute anything more than such a kind of film.

In fact, this is a movie with great discoveries, visual as much as semantic ones, but with certain shortcomings as for its screenplay, intensity and rhythm. Perhaps it resources too often to provoking the audience's tears (most of them hope that Lorenzo will go back to being as he was at the beginning), but

it deals with a complicated topic with a lot of seriousness, simplicity and at times brightness.

## References

- 1.- Aumont J, Bergala A, Marie M, Vernet M. *Estética del cine. Espacio fílmico, montaje, narración, lenguaje*. Barcelona: Paidós; 1996.
- 2.- Balló J, Pérez X. *La semilla inmortal*. Barcelona: Anagrama; 1997.
- 3.- Field S. *El libro del guión. Fundamentos de la escritura de guiones*. Madrid: Plot; 1994.
- 4.- Sánchez-Escalonilla A. *Estrategias de guión cinematográfico*. Barcelona: Ariel; 2001.
- 5.- Sánchez Noriega JL. *Historia del cine. Teoría y géneros cinematográficos, fotografía y televisión*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial; 2002.




---

Translated by: Ignacio Trujillano Martín  
[igtrumar@usal.es](mailto:igtrumar@usal.es)

Translation overseen by: Antonio Santos Iglesias  
[tono@usal.es](mailto:tono@usal.es)

---