ABSTRACT

The Seyfert 2 galaxy NGC 1241 presents a 1.5 kpc large circumnuclear ring (CNR) of star formation embracing a small bar plus leading arms. Those structures are Paα emitters but barely seen in Hα. It also presents stellar trailing arms inside the CNR. Gemini and HST imagery allow the construction of high-resolution (V − H) and (J − Ks) color maps, as well as a (J − Ks) versus K color-magnitude diagram of this complex region. The CNR is heavily obscured in V, but a fairly transparent window appears in the direction of the nucleus. Nonetheless, the nucleus presents a (J − Ks) color that is redder than the CNR. The CNR is composed of extremely young H II regions still enshrouded in their dust cocoons. However, the nuclear (J − Ks) color cannot be explained in this manner. Therefore, we propose the contribution of C stars as the most feasible mechanism for explaining the colors. If the nuclear stellar population is comparable to that of the Large Magellanic Cloud bar, 500 C stars and 25,000 asymptotic giant branch O-rich stars inside 50 pc may reproduce the observed colors. C stars release enriched material to the nuclear environment, probably fueling the central engine of this Seyfert 2 galaxy during the lifetime of stars with masses in the range 2 M\odot < M_{C\text{-star}} < 6 M\odot (C-star phase). The ejected material that remains trapped in the central potential might also explain the systematically observed increased strength of the optical CN bands in Seyfert 2 galaxies and is consistent with the significant contribution of intermediate age stars to the optical continuum of low-luminosity active galactic nuclei.

Subject headings: galaxies: active — galaxies: individual (NGC 1241) — galaxies: ISM — galaxies: nuclei — galaxies: photometry — galaxies: stellar content

1. INTRODUCTION

NGC 1241 is a Seyfert 2 galaxy (Véron-Cetty et al. 1998) that presents a complex morphology in the innermost 1.5 kpc. Paα imagery shows the presence of an emitting circumnuclear ring (CNR) of star formation with a brightness peak at a radius of 710 ± 80 pc. It also shows a 0.3 kpc long bar accompanied by an m = 2 leading arm, both emitting in Paα and centered on the nucleus. Apparently, they do not have associated absorption features as might be expected (Regan & Mulchaey 1999, hereafter RM99). The J and Ks images reveal that the CNR is mounted on a smooth inclined disk with approximately elliptical isophotes of varying position angle. The major to minor axis ratio of the outermost isophotes in the J and Ks bands reveals a disk inclination of 52°, consistent with the value given by Tully (1988) for the large-scale disk. Finally, the Ks image shows the presence of a trailing arm ending at the CNR and centered on the nucleus. These structures (Fig. 1) have been kinematically studied by Díaz et al. (2003). RM99 have found that the (V − H) color map to the southwest of the nucleus presents a color that is redder than the CNR. The CNR is composed of extremely young H II regions still enshrouded in their dust cocoons. However, the nuclear (J − Ks) color cannot be explained in this manner. Therefore, we propose the contribution of C stars as the most feasible mechanism for explaining the colors. If the nuclear stellar population is comparable to that of the Large Magellanic Cloud bar, 500 C stars and 25,000 asymptotic giant branch O-rich stars inside 50 pc may reproduce the observed colors. C stars release enriched material to the nuclear environment, probably fueling the central engine of this Seyfert 2 galaxy during the lifetime of stars with masses in the range 2 M\odot < M_{C\text{-star}} < 6 M\odot (C-star phase). The ejected material that remains trapped in the central potential might also explain the systematically observed increased strength of the optical CN bands in Seyfert 2 galaxies and is consistent with the significant contribution of intermediate age stars to the optical continuum of low-luminosity active galactic nuclei.

2. OBSERVATIONS AND METHODS

On 2000 September 30 we used the Quick Start service of the Gemini North 8.1 m telescope for NIR imaging using Hoku-pa’a natural guide star and curvature-sensing adaptive optics system. The latter feeds the dedicated Quick NIR camera (QUIRC) fitted with a 1024 × 1024 HgCdTe array sensitive to 1–2.5 μm radiation, providing a final scale of 0.0197 pixel−1. Standard data reduction procedures were applied to the images. The achieved FWHM of the Gemini+Hoku-pa’a system was about 0.4 in the J band and about 0.3 in the Ks band, both measured on the point-spread function of a field star and estimated on the target galaxy. Image deconvolution was not applied at this stage because of the photometric uncertainties that could be introduced by the methods that are commonly used. This
resolution was good enough to compare the Gemini images with the existing HST NICMOS3 data (Fig. 1).

2.1. Photometry

HST imagery with F160W and F606W filters and its calibration have been discussed by RM99. Essentially, the relative fluxes of these frames at each position are given. A transformation was performed in order to match colors derived from the HST fluxes $f_{\text{F606W}}$ and $f_{\text{F160W}}$ to the standard color system of our observations. For filter F606W, we obtained $m_{\text{F606W}}$ from the flux $f_{\text{F606W}}$ in the Vega-mag system according to Bedin et al. (2005). Coefficients for the transformation of $m_{\text{F606W}}$ into $V$ of the Vega-mag system are provided by Holtzman et al. (1995). $V$ results ≈0.1 mag brighter than $m_{\text{F606W}}$ are in agreement with the previous transformation by Malkan et al. (1995), who determined that $V$ would be 0.1–0.2 mag brighter than $m_{\text{F606W}}$. For filter F160W, we calculated $m_{\text{F160W}}$ according to Stephens et al. (2000). These authors follow two different procedures to transform $m_{\text{F160W}}$ into $H$, each providing slightly different results. To be coherent with the transformation of $m_{\text{F606W}}$ into $V$, we adopted the procedure based on the Vega-mag system.

Using homogeneous colors, we carried out pixel photometry to ascertain whether the morphology seen in $K_s$-band images is differentially affected by the presence of dust. After separating all the pixels to the northeast from those to the southwest of the major axis, we integrated the brightness and $K_s$ colors on half-rings of variable radii and plotted them against the deprojected radius (Fig. 3).

The WTC92 models of dust and transfer of stellar radiation within galaxies have been used to disentangle color properties due to dust from those due to stellar population effects. WTC92 models include the effect of light scattering by dust. Four of the models presented by these authors constitute plausible scenarios for the region under study: (1) the dusty galaxy, which considers dust and stars equally distributed within a sphere; (2) the cloudy galaxy, which considers the sphere occupied by stars to be larger than that occupied by dust; (3) the starburst galaxy, in which also stars occupy a larger sphere than the dust but...
TABLE 1
NGC 1241 Colors and Relative Fluxes

| Structure                      | \((V - H)\) \(\left(\frac{m_{\text{F606W}}}{m_{\text{H}}}(\text{mag})\right)\) | \((J - K_s)^{t}\) \(\left(\frac{m_{\text{F222W}}}{m_{\text{Ks}}}(\text{mag})\right)\) |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Disk (outward CNR) ......... | -0.1 ± 0.2                      | 0.55 ± 0.1                      |
| CNR (near side) ............ | 0.0 ± 0.2                       | 0.82 ± 0.06                     |
| CNR (far side) ............. | 1.35 ± 0.2                      | 0.82 ± 0.06                     |
| Nucleus .......................... | 0.6 ± 0.05                      | 1.05 ± 0.03                     |

\(^{t}\) J and \(K_s\) are standard colors observed with Gemini; \(m_{\text{F606W}}\) and \(m_{\text{F222W}}\) are derived from \(HST\) fluxes. Observed quantities are in bold.

Follow an \(r^{-6}\) distribution; (4) the dusty galactic nucleus, in which a sphere of stars is enshrouded in a cocoon of dust.

Errors in colors for each one of the subsystems quoted in Figure 3 are directly obtained from fluctuations in pixel photometry and propagated to the derived quantities according to the transformation equations of the photometric system.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 3 shows that the \((J - K_s)\) reddening increases inward, as well as a remarkably similar radial behavior on both sides of the line of nodes. It also shows a plateau at \((J - K_s) \approx 0.8\) mag at the position of the CNR, with a maximum of about 1.15 mag in the nucleus. The \(K_s\)-band integrated profile is also symmetric. On the other hand, the upper panel of Figure 3 shows how dramatically different are both sides of the circumnuclear ring in the \((V - H)\) color, with an excess \(E(V - H) \approx 1.0\) in the southwest side with respect to the northeast one, besides a global mean color excess \(E(V - H) \approx 0.90\) of the CNR with respect to the disk. The nucleus is also remarkable, as its \((V - H)\) color is similar to that of the disk outside the CNR, indicating the presence of a transparent window in that direction, as suggested by RM99. This conclusion is corroborated by the detection of nuclear \(H\alpha\) emission (the galaxy is a Seyfert 2) together with \(Pa\alpha\) emission, while the CNR is observed in \(Pa\alpha\) but obscured in \(H\alpha\).

Colors in Table 1 can be matched to stellar spectral types using the Pickles (1998) stellar library. The results are quoted in Table 2. We first note that the \((V - H)\) colors of all substructures in Table 1 correspond to younger spectral types than would be indicated by the \((J - K_s)\) color, in spite of the stronger reddening in the \(V\) band.

3.1. The Disk

Its \((J - K_s)\) color is similar to the color in the foreground of the LMC fields studied by Nikolaev & Weinberg (2000) and the Sagittarius comparison fields studied by Cole (2001), both obtained from the Two Micron All Sky Survey (2MASS) data. We obtained similar results by integrating six Milky Way fields around the LMC, as we show in the results. Nevertheless, the disk \((V - H)\) color corresponds to a \(B9\) \(V - A2\) \(V\) stellar population, which leads us to think that star formation occurred not only in the CNR but also reached the inner disk within its innermost 2 kpc.

3.2. Circumnuclear Ring

Assuming that the difference in the observed \((J - K_s)\) between the far side of the CNR and the disk is caused by extinction, we obtain \(E_{V}(J - K_s) \approx 0.30\) mag and the WTC92 dusty galaxy model leads to an extinction solution with \(\tau_V = 6.0\) and scattered light contributing 45% in \(V\) band. This model provides theoretical color excesses for the CNR far side amounting to \(E_V(J - K_s) = 0.30\) mag and \(E_V(V - H) \approx 0.7\), coherent with the values presented in Table 1. This source of absorption, probably diffuse, is intrinsic to the CNR and different from that discussed by RM99, which produces the difference in \((V - H)\) between the CNR near and far sides, attributed to the dusty one-arm clearly seen in the \(HST\) F606W filter image by RM99. Furthermore, within the CNR one should add the \(H\alpha\) absorbing dust cocoons associated to each one of the \(Pa\alpha\)-emitting blobs (Fig. 1).

3.3. Nuclear Colors, Dust, or Stellar Population?

Figure 4 shows the NIR color-magnitude diagram \((J - K_s)\) versus \(K_s\) for 0.1 rebinned pixels in the central region of NGC 1241. The figure presents a color excess \(E_{V}(J - K_s) \approx 0.2\) of the nucleus with respect to the CNR in a different manner (cf. Fig. 3). It is not possible to obtain a WTC92 model fitting of both the very red \((J - K_s)\) color excess and the very blue nuclear \((V - H)\). The reddening arrow in Figure 4 points to the same direction where the nuclear \((J - K_s)\) at the top of the CMD bends. Therefore, it suggests that dust may affect in a rather subtle way the nuclear \((J - K_s)\) without influencing \((V - H)\). Our solution to this rather tricky issue is that carbon stars are natural candidates to explain the infrared excess. Consideration of the LMC infrared CMD of Nikolaev & Weinberg (2000) leads us to propose these substantial contribution from carbon stars to the nuclear stellar population. Following a procedure similar to

![Fig. 4.—NIR color-magnitude plot for 0.1 rebinned pixels. The radial positions corresponding to the nuclear region and the CNR and the reddening direction [representing \(E_J(K_s) \approx 0.2\)] have been noted.](image-url)
that of Nikolaev & Weinberg (2000), we have used the 2MASS All-Sky Point Source Catalog Statistics Service facility4 to obtain an integrated color-magnitude synthesis of the LMC bar, and we have compared it to the NGC 1241 nucleus.

The 2MASS service provides CMD diagrams and integrated light photometry in $J$, $H$, and $K$ inside user selected circular regions. We choose five circular fields along the LMC bar and two foreground regions per bar field, one located 10' north and another 10' south of the bar. All regions and fields were selected with 30' radius. Extractions from the 2MASS Point Source Catalog were performed. Figure 5 shows the CMD diagram corresponding to the center of the LMC bar and to the corresponding comparison field. Then, for each of the five regions the north and south foreground fields were averaged, and the mean brightness subtracted from the corresponding region to correct for foreground contamination. The final integrated surface magnitudes were obtained by flux-averaging the five background-corrected integrated surface magnitudes of the regions. The results were $(J) = 20.38 \pm 0.07$ mag arcsec$^{-2}$, $(H) = 19.59 \pm 0.08$ mag arcsec$^{-2}$, $(K) = 19.38 \pm 0.07$ mag arcsec$^{-2}$, and $(J − K) = 1.00 \pm 0.10$ mag. The color of the nucleus of NGC 1241 is similar to what was obtained by Cole (2001) for the Sagittarius Dwarf galaxy, after correction for our Galaxy contamination.

4. FINAL REMARKS

We have discussed two dimensional photometry of the central 2 kpc of the Seyfert 2 galaxy NGC 1241, where a circumnuclear ring of star formation and the nucleus present peculiar colors when compared to the underlying disk. HST and Gemini imagery have been reduced to a uniform photometric system in order to allow the study of the photometric properties of these subsystems. While the dust arm produces the reddening of the CNR near side with respect to the CNR far side, we propose that an additional source of diffuse dust obscures univalently the CNR, thus producing a global reddening of the CNR compared to the underlying disk. Inside the CNR, there are cocoons of dust associated to the Paα-emitting condensations.

Finally, the very red $(J − K_s)$ color of the nuclear region, together with the surprising transparency of this region in $(V − H)$, led us to propose a CMD for the nucleus similar to that of the LMC bar. C stars can in fact significantly redden the integrated colors at unresolved scales, a situation similar to that we are facing in the nuclear region of NGC 1241. Carbon stars and asymptotic giant branch (AGB) oxygen-rich stars evolve rapidly ($t < 3 \times 10^7$ yr) and eject considerable amounts of dust and gas with velocities low enough ($V_{gas} < 100$ km s$^{-1}$) to be trapped by the gravitational potential barrier of the central mass concentration ($M_{Keppler} \sim 10^7 M_\odot$, $r < 300$ pc). The 500 ($6 M_\odot$) C stars and 2.5 $\times 10^4$ AGB O-rich stars (according to the LMC bar proportion) inside a radius of about 50 pc that are necessary to explain the nuclear colors would release material that, gravitationally bounded, could amount to between $10^{-5}$ and $10^{-4} M_\odot$ yr$^{-1}$ of fuel for the central engine. The intranuclear medium contamination may last during the lifetime of stars with masses $2 M_\odot < M_{star} < 6 M_\odot$. This scenario may also explain the systematic increase of the strength of the optical CN bands observed in the stellar populations of Seyfert 2 galaxy nuclei (e.g., Gu et al. 2001), and the significant contribution of intermediate-age stars to the optical continuum of low-luminosity active galactic nuclei (e.g., González-Delgado 2004).

H. D. thanks the Brazilian institutions CNPq and CAPES. R. J. D. acknowledges support from Evencio Mediavilla and Romano Corradi. This research is also partially supported by Brazilian grants MEGALIT/Millennium and the Argentinean Agencia Córdoba Ciencia. J. S. thanks the FAPEMIG Foundation (Minas Gerais, Brazil). The 2MASS project is a collaboration between the University of Massachusetts and IPAC (JPL/Caltech). The Gemini 8 m telescopes is an international partnership managed by the Association of Universities for Research in Astronomy (AURA), Inc., under a cooperative agreement with the NSF (USA), PPARC (UK), NRC (Canada), CONICET (Argentina), ARC (Australia), CNPq (Brazil), and CONICYT (Chile). The NASA/ESA Hubble Space Telescope is operated by AURA under NASA contract NAS 5-26555.

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