

*Queer
Issues
in
Contemporary
Latin
American
Cinema*

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FOSTER



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languages. To disappear social dissidents means to arrest, interrogate, torture, imprison, and kill opponents of (neo)fascist tyranny, as well as anyone who can be considered a supporter, directly or by implication, of those opponents in expanding waves of persecution. And in the context of the death squad legitimization of such almost universally mortal disappearances, a constituent facet is the specific targeting of gays/queers (along with women and Jews—and gypsies—in the social semiosis of the hated Other).

Thus, I would propose that by changing the title of the film from “death” to “disappearance,” the distributors of the film wished to suggest how, almost forty years after Lorca’s assassination (a term which, as Ian Gibson uses it, makes explicit a political interpretation of Lorca’s death), the link between the right-wing murder of dissidents and the perceived social threat of queers is underscored. It is regrettable that, although his film is based on Gibson’s many documents regarding Lorca’s death, Zurinaga was unable to explore more eloquently this link and to relate it more concretely to what might have been the fascination Lorca held for Ricardo Fernández. By failing to do so, Zurinaga feeds just as much into the homophobia of Lorca criticism—both the studies penned by the old Left, which simply ignored Lorca as a gay man, and those signed by a liberal academic tradition for which sexual preference is not a relevant interpretive category—as he would have done if he had ignored altogether this dimension of the poet’s biography.¹¹

LA VIRGEN DE LOS SICARIOS

One of the clichés of the sexual revolution of the 1960s was “Eros or Death,” by which was meant that to live without Eros—understood to include various combinations of love and sexuality, that is, a fully erotic life—if it was not conducive to literal death (i.e., an early death, as it became part of popular culture to consider the fate of those who were unpaired or, if paired, deprived of satisfactorily erotic life) meant at least an emotional starvation that was as good as death. This formula, which is customarily attributed to Herbert Marcuse because of his 1955 *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, echoes Freud’s 1930 essay *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Both essays see in the promotion of civilization—i.e., the modernist project of civilization—a concomitant, virtually proportional, de-eroticization of human life. For Freud it meant recognizing that civilization was necessarily going to produce malcontents, who in turn would then not have any rea-

son to support the project of civilization, resulting in suffering for them and a problem for society. For Marcuse, it meant being able to turn away from the stifling effects of civilization, to overcome the death threat inherent in civilization, and to reinvest in an erotic life that could allow one to live a fully human life, overcoming the deadly consequences of dehumanizing civilization.

Utopian concepts (in the radical sense of the word) like “Make love, not war” and “The Age of Aquarius” were part of an ideological chain that began with a repudiation of modern society and strove to reconfigure human intercourse in a way that was directly sexual: later, the formulation “Silence = Death” would be added, in the sense that the willful homophobic silence about sexual desire is the occasion for death, whether in the violent persecution of queers or, in what amounts to the same thing, in the silence about sexual acts and their risks that leads to the massive deaths of queer people. One derivation of this chain is the early gay movement in the United States and its international variants that saw in the unbridled promiscuity of abundant sexual experiences as much a full eroticization of the body as a repudiation of the antagonism to sexuality in general and to homoerotic sexuality integral specifically to patriarchal modernism. In short, the more one affirmed the erotic, the more one was fully human and therefore able to transcend the oppression of modern civilization—in a sense, to live free, if only sporadically, from what was viewed as the essential death grip of the latter. The bourgeois counsel in Latin America has always been (and, to be sure, only in the context of officially sanctioned heterosexual marriage) “Sexo, pero no mucho” (Sex, but not much of it), and the fully erotic life that is integral to gay culture is meant to be a contradiction of this principle of decency.¹²

One knows full well what happened to these romantic ideas under the pall of the nightmare of history. However, the simple fact is that while unbridled promiscuity can no longer be a universally accepted principle of gay male sexuality, there does remain a reservoir of avowal in gay male culture that there must be a freedom to pursue unconventional (i.e., nonheteronormative) sexualities, and that pursuit does in some measure dignify the sexual subject who is affirming the right to satisfy his own specific erotic needs.

Barbet Schroeder’s *La Virgen de los Sicarios* (2000) works to a large extent with the postmodern versions of such views of liberating sexuality within the specific context of a late-capitalist and securely colonialized Latin American society. One can question the degree to which

Schroeder's film ought even to be classified as Latin American because of the director's Iranian origins and his basically European and U.S.-based film career. Yet the film is made in Spanish; it was filmed exclusively in Colombia with Colombian actors; it is based on the 1994 novel by Fernando Vallejo, who wrote the film script; and it focuses on the city of Medellín, one of Colombia's major drug centers and the setting for Vallejo's fiction in general. Moreover, Vallejo is the main character of the film (played by Germán Jaramillo), and the basic structure of the narrative is Vallejo's trenchantly nonstop caustic, ironic, and despairing commentary on his native Medellín. If in his earlier novels Vallejo commented on the hypocrisy of the founding myths of Medellín and its ruling bourgeoisie, in *Virgen* his focus is on the precipitous decline in the survivability of life in Medellín, where going out on the sidewalk is literally a life-threatening risk, as bullets fly right and left in the cross fire of the drug wars and their numerous ancillary derivations in the form of gang and personal rivalries with accounts to be settled.

The spectator quickly loses count of how many people are being killed in the course of this relatively short film (less than one hundred minutes), and one is tempted to wonder what it must have been like to enact death on the streets of a city for whose inhabitants the presence of the film crew must have looked like a high-tech presence of more of the daily same. Vallejo as protagonist witnesses killings in all degrees of proximity, killings by others, and killings by his two sequential lovers, both of whom have the disconcerting habit—a rather perverse expression of affection toward Vallejo—of quickly and lethally acting on any of his figurative allusions to getting rid of someone or even his passing expressions of displeasure with a person who is annoying him. Deadly violence is a continuum, not in the degree of its deadliness (everyone shoots to kill and usually no one misses), but in the motivations behind it: people are killed for revenge; people are killed for being annoying; people are killed as tokens of someone or something else; people are killed just in case; and no distinction is made between fact and fiction—it is essentially the same act to blow away a noisy neighbor as it is to assassinate a blowhard president by pumping a round into a television set.¹⁵

Vallejo's novels have consistently played with being inside and outside Medellín society, and his searing commentaries are as much directed against a society he is experiencing immediately—for example, strolling the streets and interacting with people—as it is a society he reflects upon in the detachment occasioned by his being away from Colombia. In the *Virgen* script, Vallejo has, he asserts, returned to Medellín

to die. He has done all he needs to do in his life (written a couple of novels), and upon inheriting an apartment from a sister who was married to a mafia boss, he returns to his origins. This apartment, which he decorates with only a double bed and a glass-top table with four chairs, has large wraparound picture windows and a large balcony, an ideal watchtower with a sweeping view of a city spectacularly set in the Cauca River valley in the Central Range of the northern reaches of the Andes. As a wealthy colonial city and today as Colombia's second-largest city, Medellín has lovely architectural monuments, especially religious ones, which accounts in part for the title of the novel and the film.

Yet for Vallejo, the return to Medellín is the entry into an infernal underworld: no longer just the metaphorical hell of patriarchal hypocrisy that Vallejo evokes in his novels, Medellín is now literally hellish as a consequence of the society spawned by the so-called Medellín cartel. It is not just the drug trade, with all of the conventional hysteria surrounding the production, distribution, and consumption of drugs, but rather the late-capitalist dependency that trade has engendered in the form of a complex network of gangs and hit-men (the *sicarios*; cf. English *sicarius*, plural *sicarii*). The *sicarios* exercise a form of terrorism in the sense that they attack directly the citizenry, which already is victimized extensively by being caught in the cross fire of public shoot-outs and by being obliged to witness those shoot-outs. Among several insistent sounds of the film are the screams of bystanders as the bodies fall or, when the shooting is directed against the ubiquitous motorcycles of the young gang members, fly through the air. Dependency is present in the form of the consumerism spawned by drug money flowing through the economic system, which can neither account for nor control it; it is a consumerism that more likely than not prefers an American or American-like popular culture in stark contrast to the seigniorial culture of the monuments of the colonial period and the old native bourgeoisie: whether this is a social, political, cultural, and/or economic problem depends on one's ideology in these matters, but it certainly is a problem for Vallejo.

A recurring motif in the film is the music (mostly Colombian, admittedly) blaring out of stereo speakers in taxi cabs, which Vallejo interprets as a sign of the noise pollution that greets him at every turn. At one point, at his wife's end because of the maximum-volume music, he picks up the expensive sound system he has recently bought for one of his lovers and hurls it over the edge of his balcony; he then wryly asks if anyone below was killed by the equipment. Vallejo has no particular commitment to any social or cultural agenda, although like Gutiérrez Alea's camera in



Amulets of devotees
of the Virgin
of the Assassins

Fresa y chocolate that clearly captures the Cuban director's love affair with the city of Havana, Schroeder follows Vallejo's gaze as he comments on the city of Medellín, primarily to the first of his two lovers in the film, on the beauty of the city that has been marred by so much noise and bloodshed.

The Medellín to which Vallejo returns, then, is a Valley of Death, a fitting place for someone to go to die, although ironically Vallejo manages to keep out of the line of gunfire, not so much because he is lucky but because they, with their *balas rezadas* (bullets blessed in a ritual to honor the Virgin de los Sicarios), are so insistently accurate with their fire. This Medellín is most assuredly the image of civilization as death, not in the metaphoric way of Freud and Marcuse and the utopian formulations of the sexual revolution, but literally: the implicit point of the film that globalization—in this case centered on the drug trade so crucial to a Colombian economy that is merely fulfilling a bottomless pit of international demand for its major cash crop—brings with it not integration into a joyfully expanding capitalist fantasy but a dreadful social violence that rivals the worst images of lawlessness in human history. These are not the racist images by American popular culture of a dark Latin American continent (of which John Sayles's 1997 film *Men with Guns* is only a recent example) but rather, despite the non-Colombian director, an interpretation of Colombian reality driven very compellingly by the work of the Colombian writer Fernando Vallejo, to whose point of view Schroeder is remarkably faithful (regarding Vallejo's gay writing in general see DuPouy; Foster, *Gay and Lesbian Themes*, 124–128).

Schroeder's film opens with Vallejo's arrival at the "fancy" apartment of a professional-class gay man. The apartment is decorated with all of the tutti-frutti stereotypically associated with the middle-aged effeminate queer: a generalized Oscar Wilde-type decor, heavy brocades, massive homoerotic statues and paintings, intimate conversational nooks,

but most of all, guests who are mostly middle-aged men of means and a bevy of young, handsome, virile street types. This world evokes the standard-issue Latin American (originally, Mediterranean) image of homoerotic life: older, often effeminate men of means who are willing and able to pay young men to engage in sexual acts as they demand (see Román on the non-Latino representation of gay Latino men; on the Mediterranean imaginary see Aldrich). Typically, these sexual acts involve penetration—in one of multiple ways—of the older men by the younger ones with the clear understanding that the latter will be paid for their services and that the sexual theatrics will in no way compromise their conditions as young machos—i.e., as completely masculine and thoroughly observant of the codes of heterosexist masculinity. In a sexual universe in which one's partners are feminized to the point of being understood to be surrogate women (which is the essential meaning of the morphosyntactic blend *maricón*: a male version of María, the all-purpose Hispanic female name), sexual relations with them are the same as though with women, and as is the case of a man's sexual prowess with a woman, it can only serve to assert, display, confirm his quintessential masculinity.

Undoubtedly in reality, things work out differently. The party that Vallejo attends may well be populated by older men who assume the penetrative role with young men and/or with older men, by young men who are penetrated by older men who would have a street value as *maricones*, and even by young men whose outward display of hypervirility is irreproachable—even though they may assume different same-sex roles with each other in private or as viewed as spectacle by other men, young or old, self-displayed as queer or straight. Schroeder's film does not even begin to hint at any variation from the conventional *Cage aux folles* scenario,¹⁴ but the very fact that Vallejo is hardly a nelly, especially alongside his host, can begin to open the matter up to a more enriched consideration of gay life in Colombia and Latin America as figured by this film.

Vallejo's host welcomes him to the party and informs him that he has a present for him. He introduces Vallejo to Alexis, who looks to be not even twenty years old, notably beautiful beyond his Colombian version of a hip-hop exterior, and immediately attentive and compliant. Vallejo is introduced as a fellow *maricón* by his host, but he rejects this denomination, saying that his host is more the *maricón* but that perhaps Vallejo himself is, too, if sleeping with more than a thousand men counts. Of course, this is pretty common opening-gambit chitchat, but it functions to exer-

cise a measure of seduction over Alexis that confirms the way in which Vallejo is somehow different in bearing than his host; the host is, despite the transparent prosperity of his apartment, a paradigmatic Latin American *maricón*, while there is somehow something different about Vallejo: he is a writer; he has lived abroad; he has, as he promptly says, come back to Medellín to die; he speaks in a language that exchanges stereotypical gay banter and bitchiness for a profoundly interesting analysis of his society. It is an analysis that skips from Medellín's history to the deprivations of its late-capitalist economy, from the appreciation of profound cultural values (as seen in the churches he visits to escape from the overwhelming and omnipresent electronic noise of the city) to horrified commentaries on the unreflective violence that is manifest in virtually every block of his pilgrimage through the city of his youth.

Vallejo becomes a Virgil to his young lovers, who, although they may not be consciously thirsty for the knowledge and interpretation of social reality he offers them, are in some way enthralled by the way in which he has something different to say, something they have not heard already, something that contributes toward the development of the sort of self-awareness or self-consciousness that no one ever considered them capable of appreciating. In the end, it doesn't make much difference in the outcome of their lives: both of his young lovers in the film die shot down in the street. But the visual materiality of the film records the mixture of fascination and bewilderment of their reaction to what this man has to say.

For this reason, the film must image something other than a conventional gay relationship between older man and younger charge, between the modern-day version of the Greek duo of *erastes*, lover, and *eromenos*, beloved (see García Suárez on gay male-prostitution in Colombia). After chatting with his "present," Vallejo is offered the use of the Sala de las Mariposas (the Butterfly Room). His new friend, Alexis, remarks that the room gives no evidence of butterflies (it is just more Oscar Wildean decorative excess), but his words are unconsciously ironic, since *mariposa* is one of the euphemisms in Spanish for "gay," and it is apparent that this room is specifically designed for sexual encounters between men. Yet several things happen in this sequence that displace conventional signs—or, better, reinforce some signs while questioning others. As one might expect, Vallejo, as the older man, is the one who is in charge, and he orders Alexis to strip. Alexis does, but in such a way that his gun falls to the floor. After a brief exchange as to why he is carrying a gun—Vallejo will soon learn that apparently every young man in Medellín now

packs a weapon—Alexis proceeds to cross the room with the gun covering his genitals; as he places it on the nightstand, the eye of the camera briefly remarks on his evident endowments, although as he stretches out on the bed, the position of his raised leg toward the camera denies any further revelation or confirmation.

The film is, by comparison with other Latin American films and certainly by comparison with European films—even U.S. films—remarkably discreet. We do not see Vallejo himself preparing for the sexual act, nor do we see anything even remotely resembling a sexual act, except for the essential fact of two men, one of them now naked, being in a bedroom together. The nightstand lamp gets turned off and the camera cuts forward before anything beyond these highly selective narrative markers can be introduced. As is often the case with filmic discretion, it is assumed that the viewer can follow the dots, no matter how many of them stretch from one end of the real-time event to the other. When the camera resumes its business, both men have dressed again and Vallejo is offering Alexis money, which Alexis unhesitatingly accepts: Alexis has only been a "present" in terms of introductions, and all three men—the host, Vallejo, and Alexis—understand fully that Alexis will end up receiving some monetary gratification from Vallejo, the exact amount of which is, because of the power differential, left to Vallejo's discretion. Alexis needs Vallejo more than Vallejo needs Alexis, since there is an unending supply of needy young men in any society, which is only the masculine version of the formula of female prostitution since time immemorial.

The important detail of this commercial exchange is not the amount nor that Vallejo controls the amount nor that Alexis readily accepts what he is offered: if it is not enough, there will always be some other older man more willing to pay for his obvious beauty and endowments. Rather, what is important is that Vallejo, as he hands Alexis the money, says that it is for him, Alexis, to treat his girlfriend. Alexis diffidently says there is no girlfriend, which opens the way for Vallejo to understand that Alexis is perhaps not a casual pickup but rather the example of the emotionally needy younger male who is genuinely interested in what the older man has to offer beyond transitory sex. Thus, Vallejo's gesture of transaction confirms the formula of the passive male paying the active male for sex. If the willing Alexis were in practice the passive male, the narrative conventions would be unmistakably different: Alexis would either be the transvestite prostitute paid for her services as any female prostitute, no matter what penetrative role might take place between prostitute and client, or he would be the passive male grateful for the attentions of the

macho; active and passive are used here with all of the problematics of sexual encounters that redefine themselves with each new set of human participants.

Yet Alexis eschews the opportunity to affirm his conventional masculinity, which depends on the presence, if even ghostly, of a woman. Sexual attention to a woman confirms the masculinity of the subject; sex with one woman trumps any and all quantity of active (and perhaps even, scandalously, passive) sex, with or without payment, with another man. In a sexual system in which heterosexuality can never be definitively proven, the illusion that "successful" sex with a woman—which may range from display of sexuality (i.e., public seduction) to procreation (the child as the proof token of performative masculinity)—is of unimpeachable, paramount importance. Alexis, by denying that there is any *novia* on the scene, confirms from a heterosexual perspective his own incomplete masculinity and, in a retrospective interpretive gesture, allows the reader to wonder if his first-to-the-bed supineness might mean in fact that he is penetrated—or at least willing to be penetrated—by Vallejo, even when the camera's eye goes blind as to what does transpire in the Sala de las Mariposas.

There are only two other scenes of explicit homoerotic sexuality, one in which Alexis and Vallejo kiss in a moment of tender rapture after Alexis has killed two men on a motorcycle out of revenge. Vallejo and Alexis mock a hysterical witness, a pregnant woman, and then kiss after Vallejo says that Alexis is the most beautiful thing life has ever given him. The other scene is the opening move in the sexual transaction between Vallejo and Wilmar, the young man who replaces Alexis after he is murdered in the street. Vallejo subsequently learns that it is Wilmar who shot Alexis, as revenge for Alexis's murdering Wilmar's brother. In the end, it hardly seems to matter to Vallejo, as he learns to grasp the calculus of death that affects all of the beautiful young men of Medellín, images of himself as a young man, images of the young men of another generation that he loved (the "thousand" to which he makes reference in his first meeting with Alexis), without death being the necessary coda to that relationship.

One of the very traumatic points of Schroeder's film is that AIDS is not the concern of these young men and their lovers. Condoms and forms of safe sex, such as are of concern or, eloquently, of no concern in other Latin American societies (where campaigns to the effect that SIDA [the Spanish acronym for AIDS] ≠ VIDA—AIDS is the opposite of life—are part of public discourse in a way that has been impossible to



Vallejo contemplates Alexis's gun, as barrier to sexual desire

achieve in the United States), are nonexistent in Schroeder's film, since these young men are killed off by bullets before any virus can blemish them. It is at this point that the matter of Eros and Death comes into play. Significantly, and despite the very meagerly synecdochal display of homoerotic sex in three brief moments of the film, *Virgen* figures the disappearance of sexual attraction. To be sure, it is there in a latent way, as the flux of desire and dependence that allows Vallejo to keep two young men—one of them stunning, as ephelic beauty goes—within his orbit. But as sexually alluring as both young men are and as seductively intriguing as Vallejo is to each of them, the film shows scene after scene in the half-light of the bare bedroom in which Vallejo and his young lover lie rigidly side by side in bed, naked to the waist and covered below with a blanket. It is as though, like Tristan and Isolde, they were separated by the patriarchal sword of Mark, Isolde's legitimate husband. What to make of this frigid display of corporeal proximity?

I would suggest that one of the points Schroeder is getting at is the death of desire in the hideous context of violent social reality inhabited by Vallejo, first with Alexis and then with Wilmar. This is a long way from the Marcusean formulation of the conflict between Eros and Civilization, in the sense that the most touted descriptor of the social disintegration Colombia is experiencing is that of the breakdown of civilization. The tenor of Vallejo's remarks centers insistently on the current uncivilized nature of the once-seigniorial Medellín: bourgeois hypocrisy has now become one of Vallejo's minor concerns as he paces the streets of the city or peers from the watchtower of his apartment (Fernández L'Hoeste, in his discussion of the novel, speaks of the narrator as a Dantean guide through the inferno that is Medellín). Of course, another way of looking at the matter is that Medellín is the consequence of the inevitable logic of late capitalism, whereby its necessary insertion into a globalized economy through the capitalization and exploitation

of the export crop it has to offer, drugs, has produced a grotesque parody of economic success that can only be sustained through high-tech violence: Alexis's greatest fantasy is to own an Uzi submachine gun.

At the end of the film, Vallejo has convinced Wilmar to leave Medellín with him, but Wilmar will not go until he has bought his mother a fancy refrigerator, one that includes an in-the-door ice cube maker. Vallejo, after paying for the purchase, sees Wilmar off in the delivery truck, and they agree to meet back at Vallejo's apartment to undertake their departure. Wilmar never makes it to his mother's house—he is gunned down in yet another revenge killing. Vallejo, concerned that Wilmar has not returned, receives a phone call that he can find him in the morgue, already sewn up from the autopsy on his body. The stainless steel morgue slab is only another high-tech component in the machinery of death that controls Medellín and, by extension, Colombia, and the camera makes certain that the spectator senses the vastness of this facility in fitting proportion to the number of bodies it must service on a daily basis.

The infernal quality of this death machine is confirmed by Vallejo's surreal fantasy that he is wandering in the vast catacombs of the city's cathedral. But the cathedral is decorated with an archway containing the words *Domus Dei Porta Coeli* (house of the Lord and doorway to heaven). As grotesque as the medieval Catholic symbology of death may be, it is underlain by a theology of human salvation and the promise of a paradisaical transcendence of the soul. The reality of the society figured in this film has no similar theology, no theology whatsoever, to offer the bodies that pass through the gates of the ultramodern morgue.

The banalization of death and its destruction of the human will to live is best seen in Vallejo's reaction to learning that Wilmar is in fact the man who killed Alexis (there is something about Alexis being responsible for the death of Wilmar's brother, so it is a classic example of a revenge killing). Vallejo is at first tempted to kill Wilmar himself, the first time he really seems to give in to the temptation of violence except in one earlier scene in which he comes close to killing himself with Alexis's gun. But he resigns himself to the inevitability that everyone is connected to the killing of everyone else, and just as he inevitably accepts the killing of others by both his lovers, he also accepts that one has killed the other. Yet the point of the film is that all of this violence displaces Eros, and violence, rather than acting as an aphrodisiac (as it is claimed to be by some forms of heavy-sex theatrics in which pain and pleasure are two sides of the same coin), appears progressively to extinguish the opportunities for the erotic indulgences that, in accordance with the philosophy

of the sexual revolution, are meant to restore a fuller existence to the human body.

Thus, the virtual disappearance of sex of any sort in *La Virgen de los Sicarios* is neither a direct consequence of the prudishness in such matters of Colombian filmmaking (after all, Schroeder is not likely striving first and foremost for the acceptance of his film in Colombia) nor even the consequence of some vow of chastity on the part of the *sicarios* in obedience to an injunction by their Virgin to renounce the flesh, which one could well expect in the severest forms of traditional Catholicism, forms that authors from the religiously conservative Colombia like Gabriel García Márquez routinely parody. No, there is neither the observance of a religiously inspired sexual abstinence nor the compliance with rules of censorship. After all, same-sex acts are not illegal in Colombia, and even if there might be restrictions on their direct representation in film (restrictions which Schroeder is under no obligation to respect), sexual activity can always be suggested and represented obliquely, just as it is in the sequence in which the light goes out and the camera fades at the moment of Vallejo and Alexis's first encounter.

To the contrary, the subsequent narrative of *Virgen* makes it clear that sex is not taking place, or very little of it, despite the amount of sincere affection expressed. Wilmar undresses—but not completely—to receive Vallejo's kiss, standing, the first time they are together in Vallejo's bedroom, although we see no gesture on Vallejo's part to undress beyond removing his shirt, and again the camera fades before whatever sexual act is in store between them takes place; the camera only returns elliptically to show a blurred image of them showering together. Indeed, aside from lying side by side in bed without touching, the major intercourse that appears to take place between Vallejo and his male lover—whether Alexis or Wilmar—is Vallejo's running commentary as they traverse the streets of the city together. True, Vallejo addresses his lover as *niño* (child), a term of endearment that as much serves to underscore the generational difference between them as the nature of their sexual relationship (i.e., domineering and experienced older man, subservient and attentive younger man), and true, friends of Alexis and Wilmar they meet on the street make comments that show they understand the nature of the bond between each of the younger men of his older partner. But that is about as far as the display of homoerotic attraction is carried.

Now, one of the issues of a general sexual liberation and specifically of the conquest of gay rights is the display imperative, if not in public to a third-party audience, at least in private to each other, with the cam-

era a witness to an audience through its omniscient invasiveness. This display imperative means engaging in an abundant range of gestures, acts, rituals, and practices that confirm not only the erotic liaison between individuals but the centrality those liaisons have in their lives. If a common Spanish saying is "sexo, pero no mucho," erotic display affirms excess, overdetermination, and experimentation. It is as necessary to affirm the erotic bond with one another as it is to display it publicly or semipublicly, and this display also serves as a form of mutual affirmation among those who say, "I am committed erotically to you, and I have no shame in so affirming before others."

There is precious little of this display in the film. Also Alexis's and Wilmar's friends know of the relationship between them and Vallejo and comment on it openly among themselves. Yet Vallejo and his lovers do nothing explicitly to provoke this commentary. To a certain extent, Vallejo's manner of speaking to these young men with the vocative *niño* undoubtedly alerts other men to their relationship, such as the drivers of the several cabs they take. But when Vallejo gets into altercations with taxi drivers over their habit of blasting music on speakers located right behind the heads of the passengers, the variations of *puto* and *maricón* that these cab drivers use is less an attempt to accurately describe a perceived relationship than it is simply to trot out the worst insults that can be hurled at one man by another in any aggressively heterosexist society like Colombia.

While there may be some reading of signs of homosexuality—as conventionally defined by the homophobia of aggressively heterosexist societies—the general dynamic is that one can define as a sexual Other (i.e., a queer) anyone who does not gibe with one's own signs of masculine identity—which in this case is an obviated preference for blaring popular music, just as it might be any of a myriad of other signs of heterosexist conformity. Moreover, once one has defined another as a sexual Other, one has the right to announce that definition loudly and emphatically—that is, publicly. This is something that one is willing to do on the assumption that the Other, by virtue of manifesting a deficient masculinity, will not be in a position to defend himself against by either refuting the definition attributed to him or by exacting retribution from the accuser for his declaration, be it right or wrong. Vallejo is horrified when Alexis and Wilmar are able to exact retribution by simply shooting the offending cab drivers or other accusers, but it is undoubtedly a reaction that is compounded by the realization that, on the basis of his experiences with violent homophobia, experiences likely shared with a great degree of

unanimity with the fellow frequenters of the gay salon of the friend who originally introduces him to Alexis, *viciarios* who are queer no more tolerate homophobic epithets than would the machos who brandish them.

The only moment of unalloyed erotic display in *Virgen* occurs within the privacy of Vallejo's apartment. Alexis is drinking alcohol straight out of a bottle, and at one point he takes a long draught from the bottle, goes over to where Vallejo is seated, bends Vallejo's head back and slowly cascades the liquid from his mouth into Vallejo's. As a transference of a secondary bodily fluid (i.e., by being in his mouth, the alcohol has become, if only slightly, one of Alexis's own fluids), this act is a ritualized displacement of the transference of primary bodily fluids (blood, semen, urine) that is typically going to take place in the sex act.

Homosexual sex acts, of course, are not substantially different from heterosexual ones, although their semiotics may be significantly different, beginning with the radically different gender baggage brought to a sexual encounter between a man and a woman as opposed to that which is brought to an encounter between two men or two women. As such, the display of homoerotic sexuality is significantly different than the display of heterosexual sexuality, even leaving aside the commonplace assumption that same-sex partners are likely to have more extensive and more intensive sexual experiences (the calculus of these matters is increased as the number of partners in any one act increases). Yet none of these is really pertinent to the relations between Vallejo and his two lovers.

Their communion is notably unerotic (at least in the film, though the novel would have us understand otherwise); their sexuality, in public and in private (at least as far as the film shows it) is notably uninteresting and infrequent; and they engage in little of the display that is supposed to be part of the territory of transgressive sexuality. Indeed, one of the points of homoeroticism for many is to use it to figure sexuality as triumphantly transgressive, in a process that denaturalizes Mommy-and-Daddy sexuality and repudiates the limitations of decency, sobriety, decorum, moderation, and the like that characterize hypocritical bourgeois heterosexuality. Moreover, it is never an issue whether Vallejo and his lovers (who are essentially interchangeable in physique, behavior, dress, looks, and other signs of identity) fit any identifiable category of same-sex couples. They do constitute a same-sex unit, but they appear not to be a "gay" couple in one of the various ways in which the gay rights movements have influenced Latin American society. They are most assuredly not the active macho and passive effeminate couple that is the essential meaning of homosexuality in Mediterranean societies, where

the passive partner functions in extensive ways as a surrogate wife or considers himself/herself to be the same thing as a wife (i.e., the formula modeled in Manuel Puig's fiction). Nor are Vallejo and his lovers the sort of "act-up" queer partnership that now has some presence in Latin American metropolitan culture, a partnership for which the display aspects of transgressive sexuality may be an essential part of their unconventional relationship (cf. the male lovers in Jaime Humberto Hermsillo's 1985 film *Doña Herlinda y su hijo*).

From one point of view it is difficult to know if the rather bland homoeroticism displayed in *Virgen* is meant to be a significant departure from the more conventional Mediterranean model evident in the real-life novels by other Medellín novelists. But from another point of view, I would return to my proposition that the draining of sexuality, especially transgressive sexuality, of its presumed renovating vitalism and, indeed, the virtual retreat into an asexuality is in Schroeder's film a correlative of the Valley of Death to which Vallejo has returned: his announced intention to return to Medellín is far more literal than he could have originally imagined. As the film concludes, Vallejo returns to his empty apartment (itself an objective correlative of his retreat from life), and he sets about angrily to draw the drapes over the wraparound picture windows that afford such a spectacular view of the city. Whether or not he intends immediately to commit suicide or to do so indirectly by drinking himself to death or simply to descend into a reclusive state is unclear. But what is clear is that, with the death of the second lover since his return, he accepts the futility of human community and the inevitability of death, not as an unimpeachable human condition, but rather as all that is left of human experience in the Medellín of the *sicarios*.

Haz patria: ten hijos. [Build the nation: have children.]

OFFICIAL MEXICAN GOVERNMENT SLOGAN

DURING THE 1930S AND 1940S

It is frequently assumed, not only within dominant representation, but within certain kinds of psychoanalytic discourse, that there are only two possible subject positions: that occupied on the one hand by heterosexual men and homosexual women, and that occupied on the other by heterosexual women and homosexual men. Not only does this formulation afford a posterously monolithic reading of male homosexuality, but it depends upon a radically insufficient theory of subjectivity.

KAJA SILVERMAN, *MALE SUBJECTIVITY AT THE*

MARGINS, 339

Forging Queer Spaces

DOÑA HERLINDA Y SU HIJO

One long final sequence occurs in Jaime Humberto Hermsillo's 1985 film, *Doña Herlinda y su hijo* (Doña Herlinda and Her Son)! The sequence ends with the baptism of the infant child of the main character, Rodolfo. Surrounded by his loving wife, adoring mother, and closest friends, Rodolfo presents his son to the world to the strains of a saccharine song in praise of motherhood. As she has done throughout the film, Rodolfo's mother, Doña Herlinda, presides with a look of serene triumph, confident that she has successfully fulfilled her maternal role of overseeing the reproduction of society. This serenely triumphant look contains significant resonances. The look is an important tool of social control, and mothers often claim to have eyes in the back of their heads as a caution to their children. The look of scrutiny is a radar sweep that seeks to detect social deviance, and its sequel, the look of disapproval, seeks to rectify deviance detected. Doña Herlinda has indeed looked into her son's life and detected his sexual deviance, but after her mediating efforts and maternal machinations, her look communicates to her son and to the world around them not disapproval but a beatitude deriving from viewing the social code upheld—at least those aspects of the social code that are available for public scrutiny.

One could argue that Doña Herlinda's demeanor is ironic in that it masks that which can no longer be available for public scrutiny. I would like to believe that such irony yields to bliss, the radiant smile of accom-

situating his film, his actors may all (or predominantly) be male, but their bodies disrupt in significant ways those of paradigmatic Argentine male movie stars. Moreover, given the fetishizing of the "white" body in Argentine culture, a fetish that could also be disrupted by the indigenous body, the utilization of the inadequately masculine bodies of a racial Other (the black body, although present and even fetishized in other Latin American societies, is almost virtually absent in Argentine culture, especially in socially and culturally hegemonic Buenos Aires) to tell what are considered fundamental Western narratives is in itself sufficiently disruptive to imply a queer design on the part of the director.

Although César's film appears superficially to be a quirky retelling of a set of classical myths, it is in the third part of the film that a clearer queer agenda is articulated. Accused of adultery by Efesto, Afrodita is taken before the Immortals, where s/he expounds on the baseness of human society and defends the proposition that if she is a female to Efesto and a male to Ares, it is because sexuality is a matter of imagination; this sexual ambiguity is carried out in Afrodita's relations with Hermes and Dionisio (Dionysus). As Afrodita speaks, the assembled tribunal is seared by the sun, and as Afrodita stands over the fallen and caldined bodies of those who would judge her, the Argonauts arrive to carry her off. Although Afrodita bears children with Dionisio, her mutilation of Priapo is at the same time a refutation of heterosexual reproduction.

César's Afrodita is an ambiguous figure in portraying a female god in a male body, bearing children despite refuting the imperative to reproduce a human race that she sees as damned, and at least with Ares, being constructed as an object of homoerotic desire. By refuting the heterosexism that is essential to the sanitizing of classical mythology as it is recycled by patriarchal interpretations of sexuality, César's Afrodita points toward something like a timeless mutability of desire that reinforces contemporary queer postulates about the limitless erotic possibilities of the human body. César achieves this effect in part through utilizing a number of distancing devices that underscore the strangeness of his conception of Afrodita vis-à-vis prevailing versions: his version of Afrodita is as "strange" in terms of the prevailing versions of desire of compulsory heteronormativity as is the sexuality promoted by his film. This "exotic" texture of his film (a term used in an analysis by Marily Canoso included in the press dossier of the film) is enhanced by the radically foreign setting (at least for an Argentine film), the dominance on the sound track of the constant hum of the hot winds across the sand

dunes, the use of a pseudolanguage, and, consequently, obligatory recourse to subtitles as the only way of making sense of the dialogue (César may have followed the lead of Paul Humfress and Derak Jarman's 1976 queer *Sebastiane*, in which the dialogues are spoken in Latin; since Latin is taught to few as a spoken language, this obliges the audience to resort virtually exclusively to the subtitles).

Afrodita is a limited film, not so much in its artistry—it was obviously made to counter the language of commercial filmmaking, and it is very competent and original in this regard—but in that it is essentially unavailable on the market and unknown to film registries (the Internet Movie Database, which has at least a sketchy entry for every other Latin American film I have dealt with in recent years, has no entry for this film and no entry for any of Pablo César's work, despite the fact that the Argentine Instituto Nacional de Cinematografía promoted his 1987 *La sagrada familia* internationally).

FRESA Y CHOCOLATE

No matter what other issues are raised with respect to Juan Gutiérrez Alea's film *Fresa y chocolate* (Strawberry and Chocolate, 1993), it is fundamental to hold in view a dominant question: Why do David and Diego never fuck? This matter is never directly addressed by the film, and consequently it is never answered. Moreover, so much of the critical commentary (characteristically in reviews of the film and its relationship to the sociohistorical parameters of postrevolutionary filmmaking in Cuba) focuses on the relationship between these two men as a paradigm in Cuban society for "tolerance" toward difference—sexual difference specifically, but individual difference in general—in the context of the struggle in Cuba to affirm institutional and personal values that do not impose as an imperative the need for the citizen/individual to conform to a rigid scheme of social behavior. Sexual hygiene was one of the original concerns of the postrevolutionary restructuring of Cuban society—more specifically and at least prostitution as a sign of capitalist exploitation, homosexuality as a sign of bourgeois decadence, and an inadequate standard of family life as a sign of alienated commitment to the appropriate reproduction of the "new Cuban." Inevitably there emerged conflicting ideologies regarding sexuality before the revolution, sexuality as defended by various strands of the revolution, and sexuality as it might be defined against alternative paradigms

arising from the interaction of postrevolutionary Cuban society with a very diverse set of allies. Some of the issues are raised elsewhere in this study with reference to the documentary *Conducta impropia*.

Although I will leave for others to chart in detail the influence of postmodernity in Cuba through its interactions with countries like Argentina, Mexico, Brazil, and Spain, the fact that *Fresa y chocolate* points toward the opening of a debate regarding the naturalization of same-sex relations in the mid-1990s in Cuba can only be an influence coming from these (and other) societies, all of which have seen enormous changes in the past ten to twenty years with regard to same-sex relations and institutional, collective, and personal attitudes toward them (on homosexuality in Cuba see Lumsden; Leiner; Behar; Quiroga; on the liberationist ideology of the film see Serma Servín; Bejel's "Strawberry"). It is an open question as to which, if any, of these societies (with the possible exception of Spain at the present moment) can really be called gay-friendly, and much less Cuba, although the imperative no longer to persecute a sex trade necessary to international tourism in Cuba today has brought with it the relaxation of postrevolutionary norms regarding other manifestations of sexuality: sexual hygiene simply cannot be a major issue in Cuban society at the beginning of this decade, and the publication in Cuba of Felipe de J. Pérez Cruz's defense of homosexuality is a notable occurrence (there are also two documentaries on gay Cuba, Kelly Anderson's *Looking for a Space: Lesbians and Gay Men in Cuba*, 1995, and Sonja De Vries's *Gay Cuba*, 1995; both directors are non-Cuban).

It is difficult to know whether this means that Cuba has entered a period of postmodern sexuality (the lesbian, the queer), a period that allows for the recuperation of the ambiguous zone of homosexuality seguing into homosexuality (both the long-standing Mediterranean code in which the *maricón* is a crucial figure and one in which same-sex relations also occur but without being able to be called homosexual in the use of that word as a sign of modernity) or a period of some significant overhaul of the two that marks this particular period of transition in Cuba. Merely to have raised the issue in *Fresa y chocolate* and to have it raised by Cuba's most venerated film director in a film that would attract international attention represents a significant cultural moment. In this sense, it is perhaps legitimate to speak of a film that promotes tolerance, since precisely the decade and a half between the action of the film — the period just prior to the 1980 Marielitos exodus — and the mid-1990s is one in which Cuba had to see through a transition from the relative

insularity of a fairly rigidly defined postrevolutionary society and the adjustments it has had to make to the disappearance of the Soviet system. Cuba is now supported by societies (the societies in which the film has circulated, in addition to the United States) that are characterized by economic and social liberalism that could hardly tolerate the persecution of sexual freedoms (the film acknowledges support from Mexican and Spanish film entities, as well as from Robert Redford, who has taken a special interest in Cuban filmmaking). I will have more to say about the importance of the particular period in which the film is set, as well as the significance of this historical distance.⁸

The issue of why David and Diego never fuck must be treated on two levels, that of the *énoncé* and that of the *énonciation*: that is, on the level of the story being told by Gutiérrez Alea's film and on the level of his telling. On both these levels, there are ideological problems that must be addressed. These problems have to do with the horizons of coherence with respect to sexual practices at the level of the circumstances in which the characters of the film are immersed, and they have to do with what the film conceives, through its strategic handling of the story of those lives, as the possibilities of relating same-sex relationships to the postrevolutionary *hombre nuevo*, a strategic phrase that appears in the title of the Senel Paz text on which the film is based, *El labo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo* (1991).

On the level of the story being told, the film subscribes to a series of ideological assumptions — that is, it reduplicates them — that characterize fundamental assumptions regarding sexuality and the parameters of same-sex relations even while it is satirizing many of them, toward presumably forging a critique that might induce their revision by enveloping everything to a delightful degree in a broadly picaresque Cuban sense of humor. The film turns on the desire of Diego, a minor cultural bureaucrat, to seduce David, a serious university student, apparently firmly committed to the principles of the Juventud Comunista (Communist Youth). Diego has taken photographs of David in a production of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (that marvelously heteronormative text, even if ironically and critically), and he hopes that offering David these photographs will draw him into a relationship (one suspects subsequently that these photographs never existed, since after all, David never obtains them from Diego). Moreover, Diego has made a bet with his friend Germán, a sculptor, that he will be successful in luring David home to have sex with him; Diego will display from the balcony of his apartment David's shirt as a confirmation that the mission has been accomplished.

Diego comes on to David at an outdoor table at the Coppelia ice cream parlor in downtown Havana. Germán watches from a nearby table. Since places at the tables are limited, Diego joins David, who is sitting alone at a table, and attempts to put his plan of seduction into action. An additional detail is the full display Diego makes on the table of books that are impossible to obtain in Cuba (i.e., in every sense banned) but that are extremely coveted reading, specifically Mario Vargas Llosa's *Conversación en La Catedral* (1969), one of the key texts of the so-called Boom of the Latin American novel of the 1960s and 1970s, of interest because of its treatment of a period of military dictatorship in Peru. David shows interest in the books, while he also appears anxious to recover the photographs, not because they are compromising but presumably because they are in the hands of a very openly homosexual man, a *maricón*.

In this way, the film recycles a set of Latin American stereotypes that eventually become problematical for the film: The most significant one is the disjunction between the straight man and the flamboyant homosexual. David, as played by Vladimir Cruz, is almost grimly straight. Although he has a boyish body, he is fully conscious of the heterosexual responsibility of being a man, with an intense and forthright gaze that brooks no doubt from the other as to his fulfillment of a prescribed inventory of features in appearance, bearing, and speech that conform to patriarchal norms. When first confronted by Diego, David is brusque to the point of rudeness, taking care to transmit to Diego the information that there should be no mistaking David's commitment to heterosexuality and his accompanying abhorrence of the sexual deviancy of the *maricón* and his transparent discourse of seduction: David stares boldly at Diego while his hand reaches into one pocket of his shirt, pointedly withdrawing his ID card whose cover identifies him as belonging to the Juventud Comunista and then putting it into the pocket on the other side of the shirt.

Under the circumstances, given the sexual hygiene that was integral to the Juventud, this is the equivalent of flashing a marriage band under the nose of one's seducer: in a heterosexual context, it means that one is not available; in a same-sex context, it is the suggestion of the brass knuckles awaiting the queer's tempter in the homophobic violence that is the only appropriate response to the insistent come-on. David, however, is still interested in the photographs Diego has, and thus he remains engaged in conversation with the latter while at the same time barely refraining from converting his request for the photos into a threatening demand. At the height of the persecution of undesirables

and their confinement to the rehabilitation/forced labor UMAP camps barely a decade earlier, it would have been sufficient for David to denounce Diego as having attempted to touch him inappropriately for the police to have hauled Diego off, as Reinaldo Arenas explains in his autobiography *Antes que anochezca* and as is captured in Julian Schnabel's film version, *Before Night Falls* (2000). Perhaps this is still a possibility in 1979, when the action of the film takes place, but it is clearly not in the spirit of *Fresa y chocolate* to engage in the representation of homophobic violence, precisely because Gutiérrez Alea wishes to lead his audience toward a public ethos in which being homosexual is naturalized, as much as it is asserted, if only by implication, that revolutionary Cuba has outgrown concerns over public sexual morality that made possible the UMAP camps, aggressive policing practices, and the unquestioned/unquestionable right of the straight to denounce with impunity the queer.

Toward this end, *Fresa y chocolate*, on the level of the *énociation*, implicitly mocks David's attitudes, and the rhetoric of the film's language tends to convince the audience of the ridiculousness of his behavior: his phobic horror of Diego's come-on and the transparency of Diego's attempts to engage him seductively, the franticness with which he is on guard against the possibilities of further seduction when he does agree to go to Diego's apartment (including the way in which he is made the butt of Diego's joking reference, in the collective taxi upon arriving at his house, to David as "Papito" [Daddy] and another passenger picks up on the joke); his alarm when he finds homoerotic icons in Diego's apartment; the comic earnestness of his report on the experience to Miguel, one of his fellow university students back in the dorm, a young man whose own earnestness is also ridiculed in the film. Of particular interest is the way in which the film implies a critique of David's dupliciousness when he decides to pretend to be Diego's friend, at Miguel's suggestion, in order to get the goods on the subversive faggot (Manuel is apparently something of a monitor of other students' behavior). This is a particularly noteworthy detail of the film because it underscores the possibility of consciousness of two crucial facts. The first concerns how the repugnant nature of the disingenuousness of the practices whereby the straight set out to entrap the queer, out of the belief that queers are so repugnant, so vile, so injurious to public well-being that no attempt to identify and liquidate them can lie outside the pale of what is morally or ethically acceptable: given the horror of same-sex desire and its practices, no act of betrayal can be so grossly unjust as to be reproachable. Thus,

when David subsequently warms to Diego's person, when a true bond of friendship (but never homoerotic love?) develops between them and when David defends his relationship with Diego to Miguel, the latter's repudiation of David's attitude and behavior reduplicates, in an even more hysterical pitch, David's original reaction to Diego.

The second matter at issue here for the film as text is countermanning the way in which queers are allegedly duplicitous in their conquest of straight men. The assumption appears to be that because straight men possess a sane and healthy sexuality, they can only be reached through subterfuge and deceit—they must be tricked into yielding up their healthy manhood to the corruption of the queer. This would seem to be borne out in *Ereta y chocolate* by Diego's attempts to trick David into going to his room (promising him the photographs and access to banned literature). He spills coffee on David's shirt in order to force him to remove it so it can be cleaned, thereby tricking him into revealing more of his manhood than sober heterosexuality would allow—David firmly insists that he be provided with something to cover himself with—and so that he can display the shirt from the balcony to Germán as a sign that he has successfully seduced David, which is, in turn, a bit of double deceit on Diego's part, since no seduction, as it is customarily understood, has taken place, although this remains to be seen as the film develops. However, these are fun and games by comparison to the betrayal of friendship that David agrees with Miguel to participate in so as to trap Diego and more effectively to denounce him to the authorities. Thus, David returns to Diego's apartment, ostensibly in search of the promised banned books and—ostensibly to progressively thaw out in his icy distance from Diego.

The interpersonal dynamics of David's stringing Diego along requires David to accept Diego's offer of black market, U.S.-imported scotch;¹⁰ the film jumps to David being treated for his hangover by the patriarchal Miguel and being warned as to the subterfuges of the enemy. What makes this jump cut a source for the ridiculousness of David's behavior is that, in passing, the only real action of homoerotic behavior of the entire film takes place at this juncture: the two men are in their underwear and, after holding David's head under the cold-water faucet, Miguel playfully slaps him on the buttocks, exclaiming at how nice and chubby his *culito* (ass) has become. Given the fact that Diego never touches David of his own accord, this bit of homosocial bonding, built around the ritual of the good buddy helping a guy through the rough spots of a bad hangover, cannot be missed as the film's further underscoring of the ridiculousness of the soberly straight line David attempts



David's self-discovery in the "other" universe of Diego's apartment

to sustain in conformance with Miguel's recommendations. Thus, on the level of the story being told, there is a direct appeal to the codes of heteronormativity and its conventional stance vis-à-vis recognized homosexuality, while at the same time the rhetorical strategies of the film question heteronormative assumptions and in fact openly ridicule some of them as they refer to the presumed conduct of gays and the legitimization of the reaction to them by those who identify themselves as straight.

There is, however, another framing of David's mentality that is even more slyly critical than the representation of his reaction to Diego's attempts to seduce him, and that is the way in which, even before Diego appears on the scene, the first ten minutes of the film are devoted to undermining the security of David's machismo (if not his masculinity). The film opens with David and his girlfriend Vivian having just arrived at a seedy hotel where lovers go to resolve the perennial problem of the lack of any other place to make love.

Although David is determined to have sex with Vivian and is further encouraged in his desire by the scene in the next room he spies on through a peephole he accidentally discovers while Vivian is in the bathroom, he is quickly confused by her wounded woman's "All you want is to have sex with me" speech. In a gesture of nobility, he jumps out of bed, reaches for his clothes, and promises to "respect" her until they are married and he can take her to a five-star hotel; the scene ends abruptly with the startled look on her face and the accompanying exclamation "¡Qué!" (Huh). This scene is designed to provoke the first outburst of laughter from the audience, because it is obvious that poor David completely loses himself in the sexual script he is expected to follow, with the

result that he wastes his opportunity to assert his machismo and thereby to have sex with the very willing Vivian, who after all is only following the social script assigned to her not to be sexually aggressive but rather to be virginally reticent.

The camera cuts to Vivian's splendid wedding day, teasing with the audience as to the identity of her bridegroom. Of course, we see that it is not David, and with a haughty toss of the head in his direction (he is lingering in the background of the wedding party), she resolutely signs the civil registry. To add injury to insult, in this characterization of David's inadequacies as a paradigmatic Cuban macho, when they subsequently meet (David appears not to be able to get her out of his mind and hangs around her house), she offers to have sex with him. He is offended that, in a reversal of the macho scheme of things, she sees him only as a sex toy, and he stalks off angrily. It is with even greater reason that David is offended by Diego's advances after Vivian's wedding, because she has implicitly questioned his manhood, first with her pique at his inability to deliver—not for reasons of sexual inadequacy but out of a misplaced sense of bourgeois nobility—at the hotel and then by her decision to marry another man and throw the image of that decision in his face. Nevertheless, it is after spurning Vivian's offer of a sexual dalliance that David begins significantly to loosen up in his relationship with Diego, which slowly moves onto a plane of authentic friendship and affection. If David hangs around Vivian's house, it is perhaps because he needs her to confirm to himself that he is not gay: after all, one of the primary sociosexual functions of women in a (hetero)sexist society is to provide men with opportunities to affirm their manhood, not to women but to themselves and to their cohorts, through the use of women as a mirror for the male, in the endless and yet never conclusive demonstration that they are not queer.

Diego is equally a stereotype that constitutes a shorthand bundling together of diverse dimensions of the heteronormative definitions of the queer and what are assumed to be unproblematic understandings about the relationship of the queer to straight men. Diego is the paradigm of the flaming queen, whether it is in his mannerisms, his clothes (especially in private—precisely the aggressive police practices against queers focused on hair length and dress as primary signs of sexual deviancy), his voice/speech/language, his cultural choices and priorities (the defining passion for the operas of Maria Callas), and especially, in this case, his preference in food. The title of Gutiérrez Alea's film captures metaphorically the heterosexist binary as displayed by the choice

of ice cream flavors at the Coppelia—men have chocolate and women strawberry; David is, of course, eating a bowl of chocolate ice cream, but when Diego sits down at David's table, he not only begins to savor his strawberry ice cream but to engage in an exuberant rap in its defense, going on about a succulent strawberry he has found in his bowl as though it were a ripe sexual fetish. Throughout this sequence, Diego manifests, in the very public space of the outdoor patio of the busy Coppelia, a stock array of characteristics associated with the homosexual male.

Diego's overdetermined behavior points in two directions. In the first place, it is a performance designed both to make it clear to David that he is cruising him, but it is also directed toward Germán, who is the specific audience of his friend's plan of seduction. Yet, Diego's behavior is so overdrawn at this point in which one knows little about either Diego or David that one wonders why the latter doesn't simply get up and leave when Diego launches into his routine. This leads to the possibility that Diego's performance is as much directed toward the audience as toward David and Germán: Gutiérrez Alea has Diego engage in a performance as an outrageous queen before the audience of the film as part of an opening gambit to appeal to the viewers' expectations regarding homosexuals and challenge their assumptions about the legitimacy of such a sexual persona.

In so doing, however, Gutiérrez Alea gives up a measure of semiotic capital while at the same time gaining in another quarter. He loses semiotic capital by very narrowly circumscribing the nature of the sexual persona identified with same-sex desire. By circumscribing the homoerotic to the outrageous queen (which in its specifically Cuban version is represented in Luis Felipe Bernaza and Margaret Gilpin's documentary *Mariposas en el andamio*, 1996), Gutiérrez Alea collaborates with a prime heteronormative practice. This is the belief to the effect that being a homosexual not only means assuming the so-called passive role in sex but in manifesting that fact—that is, that one is assigned to playing the passive role—by performing the part of the screaming queen as an overt display of one's "feminine position." Such a fissureless homology is less problematic in terms of the manifest performance, although it does reduce the targets of homophobia to only those who so perform, and assumes without the need for further evidence that by so performing, and as individual necessarily engages in the not-always-visible acts that are the putative reason for the violence of homophobia. To be taken to be performing as the sexual deviant is the unquestioned equivalent of being

taken to be, with a full range of horrendous attributes, the sexual deviant. Such a homology is more problematical in eliding the full range of the homoerotic as identity, feeling, desire, and practices: individuals who may pursue same-sex relations without performing as queens, unless they carelessly reveal themselves in other ways, remain free of a homophobic violence that focuses on that performance.

The *mépris* homology at issue here not only assumes such a bidirectional equivalence of queeny performance and sexual deviance (to be a queen means being a deviant; if one is a deviant, one will necessarily perform publicly as a queen) in what is supposed to really matter (the non-reproductive practice of acts against nature). It also forecloses any way of describing what heteronormativity might want to denounce as sexual deviance that does not involve performing publicly as a queen. This is the Rock Hudson paradox of the presumptions about ways of being non-heterosexual. To be sure, such a possibility of dramatic irony in *Fresa y chocolate* whereby Diego would end up really being more heterosexual than David is not a possibility, and indeed the film continues relentlessly to be driven by a conception of the mutual exclusivity of the categories of sexual desire even while striving for the naturalization of the *maricón* as a legitimate social subject of revolutionary Cuba. In their encounter prior to Diego's departure to accept an invitation from an unspecified foreign embassy—a decision he is forced to make because while David may now accept him, the revolutionary system cannot, and he is fired from his position as a cultural bureaucrat—David is radiant with the fulfillment of his sexual encounter with a woman, while Diego mimes the nausea that the thought of straight sex can only have for the totally committed *maricón* he prides himself on being.

Diego's miming on the level of the story being told is, certainly, another gesture by Gutiérrez Alea, in the film as cultural text, toward an audience that also holds such a belief about queer men, which in turn ought to provoke its own form of nausea in the straight male because of its overt rejection of the joys of sex with a woman and its implied preference for sex with another man: the representation of the relationship between Diego and David both opens and closes with appeals to the horizons of knowledge of the audience with regard to sexual preference.

Yet, if *Fresa y chocolate* invests in Diego a compact range of stereotypical queerness, it is important nevertheless to comment on the relative bodily presence between David and Diego. David at no time betrays any of the overt signs that would make him suspect from the point of view of the policing of sexual hygiene—that is, at no time is he in

any danger of causing a blip in the radar screen of scopoc homophobia; Diego strives for a perfect performance of the homosexual queen. Yet the simple fact is that Diego's body is manlier than David's. Jorge Perugorría has a muscular, pilose body that he shows to advantage; this body is particularly well utilized by Perugorría in films subsequent to *Fresa y chocolate* in which the hypermasculine display of his characters, synergized by his physique, is particularly evident (as though affirming that he, the actor, despite his role in *Fresa y chocolate* is definitively straight—a highly ironic possibility in terms of the aforementioned Rock Hudson paradox whereby the more insistent the display of heteronormative masculinity is, the greater the latitude is to suppose an ironic stance toward compulsory heterosexuality). Moreover, it should be noted that masculine bodily display is traditionally more legitimate in Cuba (and other Latin American societies, but not all: Argentina and Mexico, for example, would be exceptions) than in the United States.

The foregoing is a difficult generalization because of the many changes in American society directly relating to queer culture on the one hand and the greater informality of public dress in recent generations. However, the so-called gay clone image in American society coincides in many ways with a form of masculine display that is not necessarily marked in Cuban society, as can be seen from the well-displayed masculinity of Perugorría's character, for example, in his next film, Gutiérrez Alea's 1994 *Guantanamera* (in which the female lead is played by Mirra Ibarra, Diego's neighbor and spiritual sister, the sometimes suicidal black marketer Nancy in *Fresa y chocolate*). I have written about the effective use of masculine bodily display with reference to the Brazilian Paulo Thiago's film *Jorge, um brasileiro*, 1988 (Foster, *Gender and Society*, 18–27). Jorge is also a straight character, invested iconically with all of the socially redeeming features associated with the heteronormative imperative whereby being straight means contributing to the reproduction of citizens for the State and reaffirming a series of manly virtues that sustain its proper functioning. The point is that Diego's hunky presence occupies the space also filled by the imposing straight man such as he presents in *Guantanamera*, where he is, in fact, a social redeemer, making that space suddenly ambiguous.

Moreover, Diego is really quite handsome, almost pretty, with dark, penetrating eyes, luxuriant eyelashes, and smooth, well-kept skin, features that are traditionally suspect in an American male (historically in the United States, a man ought not be too good-looking),¹¹ but not in the complex of features prized by the Latin lady's man. Finally, what is

most striking about Diego's physical beauty, aside from the ambiguity that it may provoke in a classification between straight and queer men, is that alongside David, Diego is the more imposing man. It is not that David is effeminate or slight (often also taken as a sign of effeminacy), but simply that Diego's muscular body overshadows David's often almost scrawny look. Vladimir Cruz's body, as seen in a recent Cuban film like Eduardo Chijona's 1999 *Un paraíso bajo las estrellas*, is much more filled out and muscular, without quite becoming the mesomorph Perugorria is, and this leads one to wonder if Cruz is deliberately made up in *Fresa y chocolate* to have a more emaciated look alongside Perugorria (Perugorria speaks of playing this "truly great role" in his interview with Kirk and Pardura Fuentes, 171; see also the interview with Birringer). Even if this is not so, the simple fact remains that Perugorria is quite hunky, which both underscores and undermines the queenliness of his character Diego. It underscores it because that queenliness is dissonant with his hypermasculine presence, and it undermines it because it breaks the stereotype of this wispy gay man.

Consider, for example, what the effect would have been to have the part of Diego played by Joel Angelino (Angelino plays the part of Diego's sculptor friend Germán, over whose work Diego gets into trouble with his superiors in the cultural office where he works). The wispy redhead Angelino, with a soft body that is no match either for Perugorria's muscular frame or Cruz's hard one, would simply have fed so much into audience stereotypes of the gay man as to have invited complete dismissal. Thus, while Gutiérrez Alea reproduces stereotypes in order to question their validity, his characters articulate elements of homophobic violence at the level of the story being told in order to question at the level of the film's rhetoric the legitimacy of that violence (which, I repeat, remains essentially verbal in the film). At the same time, his film backs away from fully reproducing the stereotype by deploying an actor who is both a queen and a hunk, a contradiction that is clearly visible when reference is made to the completely stereotypic Germán.

There is another way in which there are ideological and rhetorical problems between the level of the *enuncié* and that of the *enunciación*. One of the major features of the film is David's virginity, which intersects his subscription to a severe heteronormativity. It is not that the one is the consequence of the other (heteronormativity may not, in Latin America, exclude premarital sex as categorically as is argued to be preferable in the United States) but that, precisely, David has even better reason to be alarmed by Diego's advances: at the same time he fails with women,

he is being pursued by men. On the level of the story being told, David is done the magnificent favor by Diego of arranging for David to have sex. This he accomplishes by persuading his neighbor Nancy to bed David (Nancy has good reason to be nice to David, as he donates blood once when she attempts suicide by slashing her wrists), and he carefully sets the whole scene up; Diego leaves them alone in his apartment, and Nancy and David make love in Diego's bed. David is subsequently euphoric and announces to Diego his intentions to marry Nancy. He makes this announcement at the same time he and Diego are saying their good-byes as Diego prepares to leave the country for his job with the foreign embassy.

Now, there are many curious issues raised by this plot that need to be viewed from the level of the film's rhetoric: David finally has a sexual adventure but with Nancy, and they make love in Diego's bed. What I would like to propose is that, while David does make love with Nancy and while it is (apparently) a totally satisfactory encounter with lasting consequences that can be summarized by the cover term "love," at the same time David has in a very real sense made love to Diego. It is important to note that the only real physical contact between the two men comes after David and Nancy have had sex: in Diego's now dismantled apartment, David is able to exchange a very warm, tender, and clinging embrace with Diego. Of course, it is a sign of the degree of friendship that has developed between them, and of course, it is a sincere gesture of farewell that David extends to Diego, who he knows is having after all to abandon a Cuba he identifies with so deeply (he had, at the outset of their relationship, assured David that he had no intention of abandoning Cuba, even playing for him Ignacio Cervantes's haunting piano dance "Adiós a Cuba"). And of course, hugging Diego is a sign of the degree to which David has accepted the naturalness of Diego's being gay. Of course, it is also true that David can now afford, so to speak, to hug Diego, since he likely feels that the tryst with Nancy has secured unquestionably his status as a heterosexual.

David underscores his acceptance of Diego when he switches their servings of ice cream in their farewell meeting at the Coppelia. He not only gives Diego the man's serving of chocolate, but he proceeds to dig into Diego's portion of strawberry ice cream in a way that replays Diego's miming of queenly discourse, down to savoring the plump fetish strawberry. None of this means that David, like Cary Grant's character in Howard Hawks's 1938 film *Bringing Up Baby*, "just went gay all of a sudden." But it does mean there is a sympathy between the two men—



Diego and David
embrace

and in public—that goes far beyond the mere matter of “accepting” the difference of the other. From this point of view, one could speculate on how David and Diego have sex together through Nancy in Diego’s bed. It is a commonplace that one is never having sex just with the other person involved in the sexual act, but with all of the other persons who make up one’s sexual history and one’s sexual fantasies (a point clearly made by the opening scene of Paul Rudnick’s play *Jeffrey*, 1994, and Christopher Ashley’s 1995 movie version). And, moreover, it is a commonplace that women in a homophobic, homosocial, and sexist society (each adjective implies the other) are bridges in relationships that are really going on between men (this point is worked out in terms of repressed homosexuality in the Brazilian Bruno Barreto’s 1981 *Beijo no asfalto*, in which the woman unknowingly stands between an erotic bond between her father and her husband; see Foster, *Gender and Society*, 129–138).

The proposition that, in the context of a hegemonic heterosexism, since men cannot fuck each other, they must displace their attraction to each other and express it through another means—often through the woman who brings them together and holds them in a hopefully lasting bond (such as the relationship between father-in-law and son-in-law in Barreto’s film)—is amply explored in Cohan’s study on the

long-standing relationship between the Bing Crosby and Bob Hope characters in the road shows they made together. In these films, Dorothy Lamour and other women constitute a bridge between two men—a quasi-, pseudo-, not-really-for-real erotic duo whose interaction is fluffed up in terms of broad jokes of sexual innuendo—and a guffaw serves to replace, in the spectator, the moment of reflection as to what, after all, could be going on between the two men. Marilyn Monroe’s character serves much the same function in the relationship between Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon’s characters in Billy Wilder’s 1959 *Some Like It Hot*. Indeed, Sugar Cane is always complaining about how with men, she always gets the fuzzy end of the lollipop (an image that is basically nonsensical except, perhaps, as a lesbian metaphor), and the woman Jack Lemmon plays, Daphne, is a bridge between him and Joe E. Brown’s Osgood Fielding III, who really doesn’t care (because “Nobody’s perfect”) that a man is really on the other side of the woman. Indeed, what is really quite hilarious is that Cruz, as he is savoring the strawberriness of femininity, is told by Diego that the only thing wrong with him is that he is not a *maricón*. David looks into Diego’s eyes and says, “Nadie es perfecto.” What, for David, is on the other side of Diego’s queenly performance?

David gets into trouble with Miguel for defending Diego and ends up getting verbally assaulted by his *compañero*, who accuses him of taking flowers to his male lover (they are for Nancy). Miguel stomps off, yelling that the two men are *maricones*. This goes far beyond the sort of “love the sinner but not the sin” that is the conventional stance of liberal heterosexual tolerance toward the queer: one must express affection for the queer, but there is a constant need to reinforce the message that anything that can be taken as an opening toward the fulfillment of homoerotic desire is strictly off limits. The need constantly to draw the line between the two always assumes that there is a clear point in which the inauguration of the homoerotic program has begun to take place. But, certainly, this cannot be so easily determined: Does it start with a kiss? Or is it that unexpected moment of tender touching? Or is it the sudden lingering gaze of the sort that David blesses Diego with while uttering one of the most famous phrases of contemporary gay culture? That Cruz, whom one cannot expect to have much familiarity with the 1950s cultural icons of gay America, knows it in 1979, when American films could hardly have been the order of the day, reinforces how Gutiérrez Alea is playing with the blending of what is coherent on the level of the film’s story and what is coherent on the level of its rhetoric: Cruz speaks to the

level of the address of the film to a Cuban audience in the early 1990s, one that is more likely to have seen Wilder's film or, with the arrival in the 1980s of international gay culture in Cuba, to have heard the phrase, perhaps without even knowing what its origin is.

So, then, David and Diego do, in a way, fuck.¹² Cruz not only becomes Diego's deeply loyal friend, even suffering a confrontation with the relentlessly homophobic Miguel in an attempt to defend him. He also enters in a very significant way into Diego's world and, more importantly, into some understanding of what constitutes homoerotic desire, thereby understanding the suffering for individuals who not only see the fulfillment of their desire insistently denied (alongside which the postponement of David's first sexual adventure becomes trivial), but who in addition are brutally bloodied for it, both verbally and physically. David never ends up having sex with Diego in what is customarily understood to be having sex, although I would insist that the way in which they are together in the last third of the film does constitute a version of same-sex erotics, if only in a baby-steps way. Yet David performs his own sexuality for Diego.

In voyeuristic terms, the macho always boasts to other men of his conquests (often to other women, but more as a way of seducing them: heterosexuality must be constantly performed and reformed), but it is done in the spirit of (re)conforming one's heteronormative masculinity to/for the benefit and approval of other heterosexuals, not as part of the consolidation of friendship with a gay man. Diego will disappear from David's world, at least from the perspective of the year 1979, but it is clear that he will remain in David's consciousness—and as something very much more than a gay friend David has learned to tolerate. Thus, in the end, Gutiérrez Alea, in a very halting way that is not free of some significant ideological problems (for example, where does all of this leave heart-of-gold Nancy?), allows David and Diego to attain a level of intimacy that is much more than that of "good buddies" while at the same time avoiding—but just barely—bringing them into the realm of the fully homoerotic engagement that is currently (and has been, since at least the 1980s) considered imperative for fully confirming the naturalization and legitimacy of same-sex love.

Notes

PREFACE

1. Néstor Almendros was born in Barcelona in 1930 and died in New York of AIDS complications in 1992; he had moved to Cuba as a young adult. After leaving Spain as a consequence of the banning of some of his films, he went on to become one of the most highly regarded contemporary cinematographers. With Jorge Ulloa, he also made *Nobody Lies!* (1984), another documentary denouncing the abuse of human rights in Cuba.

2. I will tend to use "homosexuality" only as a bracketed term, as the descriptor of the medico-judicial assignment of deviance to same-sex erotic relations. Where such relations are endorsed as legitimate expressions of human sexual passion, I will use terms like "homoerotic," "gay," "lesbian," or "lesbigay" according to the context. Recognizing the substantial difference between women's history and men's history, I will avoid using "gay" as either an inclusive cover term or as a synonym for "lesbian."

3. Certainly, the American fraternity is an important institution for creating and maintaining homosocial bonds. In general, the American-style fraternity does not exist in Latin America, although athletic clubs in secondary schools and universities may cover some of the same territory. One significant exception is Brazil, where the *carraça* is the pledge in university-level groups that bear a close resemblance to the American fraternity; both have common roots in the German fraternities. The major difference between the Brazilian fraternity and its American counterpart is that where the latter is organized on the margins of academic concerns, the Brazilian fraternities are organized by university discipline. See Glaucio Mattoso's scholarly study *O cálibre dos carraças*, which examines the fraternity system in Europe, the United States, and Brazil, underscoring the easy and—presumably—deliberate transition (for presumed purposes of bonding rituals) from homosociality to masked homoeroticism. Also of interest is Mattoso's comic book version (in collaboration with the graphic artist Maricatti), *A aventura de Glaucio*, which deals specifically with his personal experiences in the library sciences fraternity.