

**THE VIOLENCE OF (IN)VISIBILITY:
QUEER ADOLESCENCE AND SPACE IN LUCIA PUENZO'S *XXY*¹**

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XXY (Puenzo, 2007) constitutes a landmark intervention in Latin American queer filmmaking. Arguably, it has opened up, as Tretorola (363) has rightly put it, “a new phase in the representation of sexual difference in Argentine Cinema”. A pioneering piece not only because it was the first movie to put the intersex sexual subject in the cinematic agenda, but also due to a refreshingly positive and complex perspective to sexual diversity and queer childhood/adolescence that was able to attract LGBTI as well as wider audiences, being particularly popular amongst gay audiences (Puenzo, “*XXY*: Interview”). The movie is about 15-year-old intersex Alex and her parents, who decide to move away from Buenos Aires to the isolated surroundings of a Uruguayan coastal town (Piriápolis) in order to protect her from urban inter- and transphobia. It focuses on five crucial days in which they receive the visit of a family friend doctor who would assess the viability of a surgical intervention to “normalize” Alex as female. Ramiro, the surgeon, comes with his wife Erika and his sensitive 16-year-old son Alvaro. Alvaro bonds with Alex and, after having sex with her, he experiences first hand her closeted intersex condition, along with his own self-discovery of his pleasure of being penetrated. Alex is then assaulted and victimized by a group of teenagers after being outed by her school friend Vando. The spatial configuration of

¹I am grateful to Bill Marshall and Antonio Sánchez at the University of Stirling for having drawn my attention to the importance and significance of the analysis of heterotopias in visual cultures. I am also indebted to Elizabeth Ezra and Ann Davies for their careful reading and suggestions. My sincere thanks and acknowledgement to them.

closetedness and the open secret can thus be read as central to the narrative as well as a paramount example of heterotopian space in its ambivalent capacity—I wish to argue—of both enclosure *and* opening itself up to non-normative encounters with the (queer) other.

My reading of this film foregrounds its depiction of adolescent encounters and teen-teen bondings as enabling alliances and connections that are capable of triggering processes of becoming and agency through liminal sites. These sites of liminality—mirrors, windows, screens—are also passages to “another world”—thus *figuring* ways out of heteronormative power relations and the models of identification associated with them, as well as pointing to new, self-transformative “queer utopias”. Teenage relationality is central to this process, albeit this is not only achieved through solidarity and bonding, but also through early adolescent expression of the closet’s structural and contained violence, insofar as these enactments bring about performativity through shame—both of which are, as I shall argue, preconditions for queer agency. Building upon this filmic analysis—which is to be developed in the main body of this essay—but at the same time stepping back from its detail, my overall argument is that Alex’s and Alvaro’s shame-originated subjectivities and the subsequent processes of performativity and subjectivation that they open up, are, first and foremost, spatializing processes in two senses. On the one hand, they can only take place within the context of *heterotopian emplacements*, and, on the other hand, they generate—through the workings of negative and positive affects—a new, creative and transformative *inner space* for the queer self.

Following from the above, my interest lies in putting at the forefront of the discussion the issue of *the specific space of the political*—the queer as a political space—through a close reading of heterotopias as *emplacements* in the film. This move represents a departure from existing readings of *XXY* that emphasize other, more generalizing aspects of its queer

predicament such as nature/culture, the animal, the monstrous or ethical concerns.² In my reading, the “queerly political” in *XXY* lies in its complex representation of the emergence of queer adolescent subjectivities—i.e. the universal—as a question of *space* and *spatiality articulated* around the logics of the beside—i.e. the particular. By following this line of interpretation, my broader research aim is to develop a new avenue for the analysis of queer childhood/adolescence³ in Latin American film: that of the (in)visible and space—“the irreducibly spatial” (Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* 8)—*in early queer subject formation as deeply political processes, including not only their relational but also agonistic and antagonistic dimensions* (Castro Varela, Dhawan and Engel, 2). This is particularly crucial in the Argentine context in which visibility has historically been part and parcel of the very

²I am referring to important critical readings such as those focussing on the becoming-animal and queer narratives of development based on child/animal alliances and parallels (Martin), the discursive frameworks of nature in “natural/unnatural” bodies determining personal narratives of freedom and choice (Fröhlich). Also, to those attending to “universalizing” general ethical or political concerns based on a pivotal argument on recognition of otherness or a lack thereof: justice as a primarily moral, future-led imperative centred on ethical recognition and intersubjectivity and focussing on temporality (Zamostny), castration, repression and de-politicization as the film’s main tenets based on a phallogentric, patriarchal ideology oblivious to “universal” polymorphous pleasure (Tretorola), a post-gender recognition of difference through critiquing the figures of the monstrous-hybrid and the monstrous-feminine and simultaneous visibility of what had been “invisible” (Gleghorn).

³Although my focus is on very young teenagers and I am aware of the crucial differences between (pre-pubescent) childhood “proper” and adolescence, the very few instances in which I use the term “childhood” in this article, I do it in its broader sense as defined by UNICEF and further conceptualized by Rocha and Seminet (3), encompassing pre-puberty, puberty and teenagers (pubescent and post-pubescent “children”). This is because my emphasis here is on the commonalities between children and teens: the main characters in this film share some of the characteristics that have been associated with preadolescent children (queerness, anti-ritualistic playfulness, idleness, closet-like protection) as well as being in the very process of *going through puberty*, experiencing and experimenting for the first time with their genitally mature sexuality; pubescent Alex and Alvaro are, in fact, in their early teenage years (and even earlier adolescent years). In this sense, the characters inhabit the liminal site represented by *puberty*: between childhood and modern adolescence proper, the narrative tells precisely the story of this sexual coming of age, again a liminal passage emerging soon after pre-pubescent childhood.

violence exerted against the subaltern (Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* 140; Vezzetti 37-42, 164-70; Masiello 117-24; Foster 89-91, 98-99; Delfino 238-39), and not just an instrument of struggle of the latter against what might be hidden and repressed by the powers in place.

As part of a longstanding project and in order to offer its broader research context to the reader, this article aims to be not just an exercise of close reading of a single and isolated filmic text. It should also be read as a “case study” that seeks to explore the emergence of childhood and adolescent non-heteronormative sexualities in contemporary Argentine Cinema through an analysis of heterotopian spaces as other, yet “actually existing”⁴ “counter-sites” that contradict, everyday, “normal” sites, at the same time as they bear some “mirroring” or “designating” relationship to both real places of Society and utopian spaces (Foucault, “Of Other Spaces”). Insofar as they disturbingly and contradictorily “enact” and “situate” utopias in real counter-sites (“Of Other Spaces” 24; *Les Hétérotopies* 23-25), heterotopias lend themselves to encounters with the other and otherness, as well as to conceive spaces *across* the subaltern/s, in “complex” ways (Marten 299, 312): it is in this relational potential where the highly ambivalent political value of heterotopias lies. Although the emergence of queer heterotopian spaces recurs in a considerable number of post-2000 Argentine films, and is thus applicable to a wider corpus,⁵ due to reasons of space and necessary detail required by close reading, I will concentrate my analysis on one paradigmatic film, namely *XXY*. For this purpose, I will base my analysis on Foucault’s, and

⁴This expression is Johnson’s own translation of the original French (84). I use it here because I find it more accurate than those used in the published translations that I have had accessed to.

⁵My analysis extends to a wider corpus initially constituted by the following films: *Glue* (Dos Santos, 2006), *XXY* (Puenzo), *El último verano de la Boyita* (Solomonoff, 2009), *Miss Tacuarembó* (Sastre, 2010), *Ausente* (Berger, 2011). All these films interrogate the figure of the sexual(ized) child/adolescent, and they all problematize sexuality and gender from non-heteronormative perspectives.

some crucial subsequent scholarly work on heterotopias, as well as on Sedgwick's topologies and her "logics of the beside" (*Touching Feeling*). My reading connects teenage queerness to space, and more specifically to heterotopian space as a condition that allows for the emergence, exploration and development of queer adolescent subjectivation, a process involving imagination, creativity and agency. Furthermore, the strong link between heterotopias and children/young teenagers is what will lead me to "queer utopias", since heterotopias, ultimately, are nothing but "localized utopias" and it is particularly children those who "know [them] perfectly well" (Foucault, *Les Hétérotopies* 24).

In what follows, my analysis is organized around three crucial sequences in the film: firstly, an early sequence of Alex and Alvaro teen-teen bonding, pointing to a potential queer "landless" family, a symbolic territory anchored in dancing, play and music sharing; secondly, half through the film, those instances that trigger the narrative climax: mirrors, windows and screens as liminal sites figuring lines of flight and passages from the heterotopian closet-village to the queerly "utopian" (i.e. the *beside*, as we shall see); and thirdly, the final farewell scene in which Alex's re-enactment of her own shaming experience, this time *beside* and against Alvaro, can be read as a retrospectively revelatory "hinge point" of the narrative in which negative affects (shame and exhibitionistic aggressiveness) are in the process of *effectively* becoming positive affects and agency—such as Alex's final self-reflective integration to social life without medical interventions. Each of these three key moments in the narrative corresponds, respectively, to the three sections in which this article is organized and presented through their respective sub-headings.

Of queer utopias in the closet-village? (Other) encounters with the (queer) other

Alex's adolescence in the remotely-located village can fruitfully be read as combining aspects of "heterotopias of deviation", "crisis heterotopias" as well as "heterochronies" as described by Foucault ("Of Other Spaces"; *Les Hétérotopies*). All these three types of heterotopia condense her intersex adolescence as a gendering and sexualizing rite of passage⁶ in a symbolically dislocated and geographically displaced closet: the closet—usually, a symbolically defined space rather than a place—has become *literalized* into a concrete, situated and temporally marked-out emplacement especially devised for her as a temporary setting by her family. Temporally, it encapsulates time until sex/gender "normalization"—through binary choice—is achieved, hence its strong heterochronic dimension. In short, the isolated habitat has *physically encapsulated* the usual attributes that are so idiosyncratic of the contradictory tensions that define the specificity of *any* "closet space" (Brown 27-50) as heterotopian and "heterochronic": if it offers a site for transitional "protection" against the violence imposed on intersex adolescents before they are (heteronormatively) "normalized" as female or male, it also offers the possibility of queer alliances and encounters. These encounters point to a queer, shame-originated "relationality" (Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* 37) metaphorically condensed by the trope of the "queer, migrant family of animals and teenagers" that take place in the very heterotopian core of the closet space. This trope could be read off from a crucial scene that sets the tone towards the beginning of the film and, being sustained as a metaphor for not only dislocation ("migrant") but also queer teen-teen relationality ("family") and agency throughout the narrative, it signals what I would call instances of "queer utopia" in *XXY*.

⁶For an analysis of childhood "rites of passage" and the transitional dimension between states—typical of "crisis heterotopias"—in Greenaway's films, particularly *A Walk Through H* and *Drowning by Numbers*, see Elliot's and Purdy's enlightening piece (277-87).

In such a crucial scene, Alex honors Alvaro with a gift—a pendent bearing a turtle’s tag with a unique serial number—in a “siblinging” gesture that unites them as part of a landless, “migrant” “queer family”. The scene symbolically seals a teenage bonding that is able to bridge the isolation of both adolescents represented by Alvaro’s constant use of headphones (Zamostny 198-201) and Alex’s prey-like aggressiveness, and brings about a culmination of a bonding sequence in which they wander around together along the coastline. A key milestone of this sequence is a preceding scene in which Alex and Alvaro are dancing and sharing music—Alvaro’s headphone tunes become on-screen sound for the first time as soon as Alex can hear them—in an “couplifying” edited sequence of two-shots of the pair against the background of the open “maritime” horizon (Deleuze and Guattari 183-91): like in Agamben’s infancy’s playland (*Infancy* 75-96), a utopian topology reveals itself here, through the figure of “infant” teenagers playing and flying from the structured nature of (ritualistic) family interactions from which Alvaro, ostensibly, wants to escape through his use of headphones. If the latter certainly constitutes his own way of shying away from shame—Alvaro is constantly belittled and bullied by his father—they could also be read as a veritable metaphor for the unsayable visibility of antagonism, of its impossible (verbal) literalization and remind us that his line of flight is certainly anti-social and full of antagonistic negativity (Laclau and Mouffe 122-27). This is undoubtedly a negative response to shame,⁷ but one that, in its double movement towards both “individuation” and “relationality” (Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* 37), will eventually lead, notwithstanding, to creativity: a creative, life-transforming relational and bodily alliance between Alex and

⁷This negativity is clearly an instance of (queer) refusal as conceptualized by Edelman (108, 118, 149): the “*sinthomosexual*” child’s radical refusal to meaning, communication and futurity within the confines of heteronormative familial ideologies imposed on queer children and teenagers through the always readily available “figure of the child”. I am grateful to Bill Leap for inspiring me into this line of reading.

Alvaro, foreshadowed by the former extracting the latter's headphones. Significantly, this bonding sequence, taken as a displacing whole, follows immediately after a previous one set on the beach, in which marine biologist Kraken (Alex's father) finds a sea turtle –brought by the town fishermen– for his aquarium whilst uttering his obsessive question about gender assignation: “-¿Está identificada?”/-”Hembra” [-Has it been identified?/-Female]. In this context, the queerly utopian, teen-teen bonding will also trigger other alliances between Alex and other teenage village dwellers: with Roberta—who will enable in Alex the inception of another line of flight—and with Vando—paradoxically through his triggering of the closet's double-edged sword-like structural violence in an act of “betrayal”. As we shall see in my analysis of liminal sites and frames in the second section of this article, these lines of flight, alliances and becomings are effected through mirrors, windows and windscreens. If the latter are the liminal hinges through which this agency is actualized, it is the political potential of the heterotopian emplacements that are central to the narrative—the closet-village, the boats, the mirror—what makes these transformations possible: as Johnson has argued, “heterotopias provide escape routes from power” by opening up lines of subjectivation (86).

These queer subjectivation processes point to what I would call “queer utopias” in that they constitute radically other, non-already formulated utopias made possible by the open-ended movements of the heterotopian emplacements represented in the film (the village-closet, the boats, the mirror), through imagination rather than preconceived anticipation or promise. A radically *other* “world of intimacy” opened up *beside* Alex and *beside* Alvaro, and *within* the community of teenagers.

This space of the *beside*, however, if conceived as immanent and planar (Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* 8), is not only affective but spatially political. In this regard, Alex invitingly dancing to Alvaro's music on the coastal esplanade can be read not just as a hint to

relationality through an “epiphany” of “mutual recognition” (Zamostny 201), but also as a token of child/teenage play and dance that can be interpreted as the *queerly utopian* in this film. I am referring here to the redemptive *eventfulness* of dance, play and mirrors as those queerly utopian forces that point to those *other events* that are able to creatively displace heteronormative, sedimented familial structures and rituals (Muñoz 143; Agamben, *Infancy* 82) along with the *traumatic events* that the latter tend to create (e.g. the familial structure of the village-closet triggering the “visual rape” as traumatic event). Away from their parents and the adult world, Alex and Alvaro engage in line-of-flight activities that spatially suspend ritualistic time: expressive drawing of animals and the (inter)sexualized body as well as dancing, sexual intercourse, shared wandering and exploring the coastal village with its rural surroundings. The creativity and agency of Alex’s response to her hostile reality can only be afforded, as we shall see, by the possibilities opened up by the aforementioned (physical and symbolic) movements.

In what follows, I will analyze *how* Alex’s creative agency is achieved: the key role that both liminal sites and the spatial logics of the beside play, within the context of heterotopian emplacements, in her personal and social journey of queerly political subjectivation. I will also explore a closely related issue that interrogates antagonism as another key dimension of the relational and the political: could Alex’s agency have been achieved, *within the heteronormative context of the closet*, without her expressing her (introjected) violence?

Liminal figures in liminal sites: mirrors, windows and screens

So, how does this filmic text connect the heterotopian emplacements that it represents with the utopian spaces that it figures? How are these connections and movements between spaces suggested and, in part, performed? How are they made possible? I would argue that it is only through the interconnecting work of liminal sites that this is made possible.

Crucial liminal sites in *XXY* are Alex's bedroom mirror and window, Kraken's windscreen and Roberta's bathroom mirror/screen. These liminal sites prompt mutations and becomings. In particular, the three "mirror scenes"—in which both Alex and Alvaro participate—play a decisive role in this film. Indeed, by means of introducing a hinge that attends to a "reconstitution" of the queer self and gaze, mirrors mark a "mixed", "joint" or "intermediate experience" (Foucault) that *connect the heterotopian place that they inhabit—the binaristic sex/gender closet represented in this scene by Alex's cage-like bedroom—with the queerly utopian*, those shared virtual spaces of their queer inner selves that the mirror is able to incipiently reveal—not just reflect—as a horizon of potentiality, and subsequently trigger in the narrative. This crucial role of the mirror in *connecting* the heterotopian with the utopian has been emphasized by Johnson (*Some Reflections* 1): "[Heterotopias and utopias] are not opposed; they form a continuum with the mirror placed in between as an "intermediate experience", somewhere between the real and the unreal."

Thus, after her sexually penetrating Alvaro, the mirror enables Alex to "direct her eyes" towards herself in a different way, that is to say, from a perspective de-centered by virtuality, by a placeless, "virtual point" (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 24; "Different Spaces" 179) different from her family-defined self. Her current (familial) self appears in its present "actuality" as a frozen intersex-to-female "daughter-body" in front of the mirror and is visually symbolized by a doll without (visible) genitals shelved at the back of her bedroom

that the mirror reflects as the closet-imposed, haunting background to her own image. The mirror provides her, by contrast, with a *utopian experience of a very material virtuality* of her own self which, immediately after her experience of penetrating a male body, points to self-recognition beyond mere perception that is shared only by another teenager (Alvaro)—a point to be developed in the analysis that follows. The *connecting* role of the mirror—with its virtual de-centering of Alex beyond her family-imposed one-sex and one-gender compelled self—brings about not only self-recognition, but—as we shall see through the immediately subsequent development of the narrative analyzed in this section—a horizon of potentiality and queer becoming. The mirror as virtual space had already anticipated this passage to queer relational becomings through Alex/Alvaro’s first bonding towards the beginning of the film: as Fröhlich (163) has noted: “When we see both characters inside the home for the first time, *they appear together in the virtual space of the mirror*”. What is also significant about these mirror scenes is that they allow for the key reconstitutive role of secondary narcissism—in both its (auto)eroticism and outward destructive dimensions—to develop as a necessary movement in the process of intersex subject formation, and this shame/narcissism pairing is absolutely vital in the context of our trans- and intersex-phobic world.⁸ I will analyze in detail the third of these “Alex/Alvaro’s mirror scenes”—to which I will refer to as Alex’s bedroom mirror scene—as it is crucial for the development of the film’s narrative.

Alex’s bedroom mirror scene represents the culmination of a day in which the two teenagers had intense verbal and bodily interaction and encounter: the pair discuss, amongst

⁸As pointed out by Marshall (88-91), secondary narcissism plays a vital role for gay (and queer) subject formation, a role that is fundamentally different from the heteronormative narcissism as expressed in male film stars or in dominant everyday culture. In my view, this role could be described as “reconstitutive” or “reparative” of the ego for injured or shame-constituted selves such as those of LGBTI people, particularly in early phases of subject formation, including queer early adolescence.

other issues, the gaze of the others towards Alex, which Alvaro verbally frames, in a (hetero)normative manner, as “*Vos no sos normal. ¿Por qué la gente te mira así? ¿Por qué todos te miran así?*” Overloaded with the negative affect that contagiously prevail in paranoid positions rather than individuals (Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 137, 150), this closet-structuring framing had been verbally introduced by Suli (Alex’s mother) in the immediately previous scene as a certain persecutory “*mirada de los demás*” [“the gaze of the others”] felt by herself during her pregnancy in Buenos Aires even before the very “object” of the paranoid gaze was born or even visible. This recurrent motif of “the gaze of the others” textualizes the theme of the open secret throughout the film, by insisting in the fact that the injuring capacity of the closet’s “double-edged weapon” involves family and friends and not just the closeted person (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 80-81). However, despite the prevailingly closet-structured, violent economy of the visible, this shared day of conversation and encounter culminates in Alex and Alvaro’s unexpected sexual intercourse, and it is precisely after this erotic scene between the teens that the crucial mirror scene takes place. Interestingly, this teen-teen shared erotic scene is based on bodily contact rather than on the “empire of the gaze”, but it is significantly interrupted by Alex’s father’s invasive look, thus introducing a contrast between, on the one hand, the familial closet’s paranoid-positioned, punctuating gaze and, on the other hand, the pleasure-seeking flux of teenage bodily contact, however aggressive the latter might be. A truly turning point in the narrative, the immediately subsequent mirror scene marks both a line of flight and a (re)constitution of Alex’s (queer) self.

Indeed, after having penetrated Alvaro, Alex—now fully naked in front of the mirror—inspects herself. Alvaro, who is watching through the window *from beside*, is able to see Alex’s torso in profile view. But most importantly, he becomes, in turn, the silent witness—

through the *reframing* mediation of a window that redoubles, for the spectator, Alex's (invisible) mirror from beside—of Alex's self-recognition in a reflected image that includes what the camera never shows to the viewer: her/his genitalia. However, Alvaro only witnesses *the act* of self-recognition but *not the full content* of that recognition: even if penetrated by Alex's penis, he does not see it until the end of the film. At the same time, in the contiguous dining room, Alex's mother and Alvaro's parents—the three adults who seek sex/gender “normalization” through mutilation—are getting ready for the family dinner, while Kraken—the “odd adult out” who *thinks*—is in his study, deep in thought, just after looking at his newspaper cuttings about a local intersex man. Alex's mother's call for Alex to join the family dinner ritual is uttered as a female interpellation “*Hija!*” [“*Daughter!*”] that is dissonantly edited over the image of penis-inserting Alex in front of the mirror looking at her/himself naked, in a three-quarter shot. The camera lingers on her own reflection from behind whilst also showing the reflection of her heteronormative caricature—a doll without genitals at the back of her room—and immediately pans to the left and cuts to frame Alvaro in a medium long shot (knees up), through the side-window, standing alone outside, but occupying only the right half of the frame (the frame is divided by half by a pillar, highlighting an empty space left—for Alex's?—to the left half of the frame). He is caught again in his besetting, lonely watching, in yet another of his abiding attempts to decipher Alex throughout the film, but this time Alvaro is witnessing her *looking at herself* in profile view in front of the mirror. However, the camera does not cut to a counter-shot from Alvaro's point of view: this does not happen until Alex feels watched, emphasizing again Alex's perspective and focalization in the film (despite the frequent POV shots from Alvaro's onlooker position). Indeed, after a non-shared medium close up from behind of Alex's looking down (at her own genitalia) through the mirror, the camera pans slightly to the left, significantly allowing us to see the doll's hands and legs at the back as well as anticipating

Alex's immediate *sideways movement towards the window* in order to be able to see Alvaro watching her. Alex's looking awry because of her feeling watched implies a switch of diegetically framed frame: *from* (her/himself through) *the mirror to* (Alvaro through) *the window*. Alex's direct look into Alvaro eyes inaugurates for the first time in the film the "eyes-in-the-eyes" scene of mutual bodily recognition, thus establishing Alex's as the pivotal gaze in this encounter of gazes. Alex's gaze's movement as well as the doll's limbs in the background, along with the camera's reframing from mirror to window, foreshadows the narrative development to come: her line of flight will have its vantage point precisely in that side-window. It is through the window then that the encounter of gazes between the two adolescents takes place: a medium, "hip shot" of Alvaro is shown from Alex's point of view, which is followed by an equivalent medium, "hip reverse-shot" of Alex in profile view, but turning more frontal towards Alvaro, making her "breasts" more visible in contrast with the previous frontal shot of Alvaro's chest, at the same time that Alex's genitalia become invisible because covered by her hand. The analysis of this crucial sequence of shots can be divided into two interconnected levels: the level of the image and the level of the gaze.

At the level of the image, the editing is crucial: the contrasting effect of the shot/counter shot sequence consisting in a medium shot of Alvaro's trunk (in frontal position), immediately followed by an "equivalent" medium "knee shot" of Alex's top in front of the mirror in profile view displaces Alex's focus on her genitalia in the previous "solo" mirror shots to her body image as a whole through contrast with Alvaro. If in the first shot described above, the viewer is culturally and linguistically impelled to identify (male) "chest", in the second one the signifier (female) "breasts" is imposed to the viewer. However, as in Foucault's Magritte –"this is not a pipe"– the blurred view of Alex's genitalia and the preceding penetration scene somehow disturbs this implicit identification compulsion to

which the image is coercively subjected by language (Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*; Deleuze 42-44). And this is where the analysis of the exchange of gazes becomes narratively and symbolically significant: if the gazes of both teenagers encounter through the window—an encounter whose intensity is marked by the increasingly closer medium shots featuring each other’s mutually gaze-touched bodies—the window frame introduces now another order of the look that differs from Kraken’s invasive one analyzed above. Alvaro-Alex reciprocal gazes represent, in fact, the recognition from another adolescent that is acknowledging another type of encounter based on a mutual pleasure-seeking experience, rather than on a paranoid position and gaze. The window, in other words, functions as a social passage through which *Alvaro has access to Alex’s own mirror*—how s/he sees her/himself (Fröhlich 164), her incipient becoming—in the liminal, *virtual site* where the fantasy of self-origination of a body opens up as a mutually constituted reality through shared, mutual recognition. In other words, Alex is perhaps for the first time, not merely objectified as a piece of semi-nakedness to be observed, classified and interpreted, but as a veritable body- and subject-in-process of both Alvaro’s and Alex’s own gaze. The side-window’s angle and framing does not however allow Alvaro to see Alex’s genitalia, and these are only suggested to the audience as their reflected image is blurred.

In terms of both character development and the film’s economy of the gaze, this “mirror scene event” constitutes a major turning point experience for the main protagonist. As in Paul’s version of the “mirror stage” in Butler’s analysis of Cather’s *Paul’s Case*, Alex at this point of the narrative “assumes the place of the one who *watches* [her]himself” and this “constitutes a displacement of the persecutorial ‘watchers’ who hounded him[her] in” up until that point in the story (*Bodies That Matter*; 166). In fact, after such a mirror-configured experience of self-reconstitution, she takes the visual and symbolic boundaries of the village-

closet to their most violent limits: by means of aggressively and unexpectedly penetrating Alvaro and later subjecting him to an exhibitionistic, unsolicited and humiliating sight of her genitalia at the end. The subsequent mirror scene could be read, in parallel to that of Willa Cather's text, albeit differing from Butler's reading of it: in both the short story and the film, this scene is self-reconstitutive, but unlike Paul's "self-winking" *certainty* of his own desired "perfection" achieved and already over (Cather Location 28783), the mirror reflection appears in Alex under an *interrogative modality* that "performatively" (Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* 67-69) marks the *uncertain indeterminacy* of her line of flight in its very inception; paraphrasing Cather (Location 28729): Was s/he "exactly the kind of (intersex) [adolescent] that s/he had always wanted to be"? There is an ironic "fantasy of radical self-origination" (Butler 166) here—ironic because the self-origination applies to an interrogative acceptance, even if uncertain, rather than a change or re-dressing, of her "natural"/actual body—and this fantasy, as Butler suggests, "cannot only be sustained at the price of debt, becoming an outlaw and finally finding him/[her]self on the run" (166), but also on the condition of the violent victimization inflicted to her, with which this sequence is resolved (Alex's "visual rape" functions as a kind of societal punishment equivalent to Paul's suicidal, "losing game" resolution to the narrative of his rebellion). As we shall see, this is suggested in *XXY*, in the sequence initiated by Alex disobeying her mother's call to perform her duties of family rituals (the family dinner): s/he escapes through the window, but her journey of "finding her/himself on the run" (166) was bound to be arrested by an intersex-phobic assault rather than by any "socially alienated" decision on Alex's part that "[s/h]e would show her/himself that the s/he was game" (Cather Location 28793) for hedonism or suicide.

We can delve deeper into the mirror scene analyzed above by using the Freudian notion of secondary narcissism as introduced at the beginning of this article. If, on the one

hand, this narcissism is *reconstitutive*—as in the queer “fantasy of self-origination” introduced above—it also functions, on the other hand and due to the closet-structured context, in the Freudian sense as a double-edged sword. The ambivalent, double nature of such a narcissistic “weapon” enables moments of *autoeroticism* but also triggers moments of *outward destructiveness*, as demonstrated, for instance, in Alex’s violent exhibitionism of her penis in a destructive way towards Alvaro and their bond at the end, after Alex’s victimized-victimizing identification with the aggressors. If the open landscape of the sea always figures in these scenes as witness—as in the bathing scene or in the topless scene when she plays with a lizard by the window showing the “seascape” and its tidal sounds as background—the village-closet, by contrast, is what triggers this violent ambivalence within which all (secondary) narcissisms are structured. After all, the closet space has been defined by queer theory just like psychoanalytical ambivalence and mimetic identifications prove to be: a “double-edged weapon” (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 80-81; Butler, “Imitation...” 317). And it is within this highly ambivalent and destructive context that defines the closet that the mirror scene enacts narcissism as a possible line of flight from family imposed ideals and from the dominant, heteronormative figure of the Child that is so saturated with futuristic-familial ideology (Edelman 1-31). This is the narcissism of those—as Marshall has put it when analyzing the *Les Nuits fauves/Savage Nights*’ youthful bisexual protagonist—“socially adrift and unfixed” who suddenly find themselves “deprived of *la place*” (89), those who, like Alex, feels symbolically excluded from the dinner table just after her experiences of the penetration and the mirror scene. The “rigidity of the self” produced by investments in already sedimented external ideal standards and hegemonic ego-ideals, in *XXY*, is not, *by necessity*, narcissistic but *socially* bestowed by the *institution* of the family: it is represented by the either/or of the socially imposed “femaleness” or the father-desired “maleness”, whereas Alex’s and the other teenagers’ desires open up new possibilities of non-rigid

narcissistic investments—Muñoz’s (90) “changing and unfixed” ego-ideals as “wish-landscapes” of potentiality—for the queer bodies and the queer selves.

Following with the analysis of the mirror scene, after a split-second exchange of gazes once the night has fallen and it is already dark—the sequence narrates the passage from day and twilight to night—the pair go different ways representing different paths: whilst Alex, once fully clad, escapes her cage-like bedroom-closet through the window to find refuge in her female teen friend’s shack, Alvaro reintegrates himself to the “heteronormative” family dinner through the main household door. The camera follows, however, Alex (and then, Kraken). In this teen-teen bodily encounter, the next sequence shows Alex and her unnamed friend (Roberta) framed together lying on the same bed as they talk about Roberta’s first sexual experience with a boy. After sharing the night beside each other in the latter’s bedroom, the two adolescents have their morning shower together in a very intimate scene in which androgynous Alex tenderly washes her girlfriend’s long hair. The scene is edited predominantly through the use of two-shots of the adolescents—the camera thus emphasizing the sense of encounter—and filmed through a bathroom mirror/screen. The mirror/screen mediating the entirety of this scene—interposing itself between the camera’s eye and the viewers’ eyes—could be read as figuring a heterotopian screen able to connect to their (queerly) utopian bodies through a bodily alliance prompting to initiate a line of flight. There is a “touching feeling” sense of tenderness and of erotic, not just friendly, encounter in this scene. However, whilst Alex gets rid of the paint that her friend had put on her nails—as part of her journey against the socially imposed feminization—Roberta is depicted as a very feminine girl with long curly hair, conveying an impression of undomesticated, “natural” femininity. Affect-laden, this scene is queerly “*reparative*” rather than therapeutic (Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* 128, 149-151): it points to a reciprocity of a different kind,

different from the previous scene shared with Alvaro through the eye-pivoted (liminal) mediation of the on-screen framed window and mirror. Indeed, the liminality of the mirror and the window was eye-pivoted and cinema screen-like, a jointly contaminating and intermediating experience: if Alex's and Alvaro's mutual exchange of gazes takes place through a sideways window, for the viewer, this visual participation also happens through the queerly utopian surface of Alex's reflected body—a body that even if phenomenologically perceptible, is *not* materially (yet) *there*, other than as figuring an inception point of a process of self-reconstitution. The liminality of the window and the mirror is thus, like the cinematic screen, heterospective (Powrie 349-52): it takes place through a teenage⁹ shared utopian frame that, by promising a sideways, centrifugal escape (Powrie 352), it challenges the family imposed one-sex/gendering gaze, and enables a mutual *indexical* contact—a contact that is felt, but only because *physically mediated* through the teenagers' eyes and their movements. The liminality of Roberta's bathroom mirror/screen is, in contrast, light-centered for it lets us see real, actual bodies rather than eye-mediated framings and reflections and it also allows us to see its own materiality: its condensed water drops, its dampness, its dirt are materially present and opaque, signaling to the viewer how the threshold of the visible world in the film—emotions and affects—is intersubjectively based on the sense of *touch* (rather than on inter-bodily contact mediated by sight, gaze and anal penetration—the pivots of Alex's relationship with Alvaro, largely giving rise to the negative affect and scopophilic, phallic

⁹Even if Powrie's (341, 346, 351) analysis of heterospection refers to preadolescent children, I am extending it to *queer* teenagers, since we are dealing here not just with straightforward "heterotopias of crisis" that typically characterize heterosexual adolescence (or rather, heteronormative definitions of pubescence and teenagers), but primarily with "heterotopias of deviation" in which closeting, (self)perceptions of "monstrosity" and so forth tend to lead to idleness which, according to Foucault, represents a deviation from leisure as the norm for adults (and perhaps "normal" adolescents) in our contemporary cultures. Alex's prey-like characterization and Alvaro's disconnection and idleness in the film underscore this "deviation heterotopia" dimension.

intensities). If Alex's bedroom mirror was in its entirety within the screen frame—the mirror frame was fully visible to the viewer, its mirror status fully evident, thus visually illustrating a “secondary identification scene”—the bathroom mirror/screen, through which we have access to the two girls' bodies, is not visibly framed within the cinematic screen, because the whole screen is taken over by the reflection of this (not *entirely* visible) bathroom mirror/screen—the latter is only visible in its opaqueness but invisible as a containing whole. Thus, Roberta's mirror/screen plays the role of a *framing* mirror (rather than a *framed* one), and in this sense, it can be fully identified with the camera's point of view—the scene of primary identification—and is therefore intrinsically connected with primary narcissism and the drives. Narratively, this *framing function* of Roberta's mirror/screen can be paralleled with the opening sequence that frames the whole narrative of the film through a figure of Roberta as an (unnamed, undomesticated) girl chasing Alex in the wild forest: unnamed Roberta is barely a character in the film—we know very little about her and she has no real identity or psychological development—it could thus be argued that she has a primarily rhetorical function rather than an actantial/narratological role. She can be taken to stand for the *figure* of the girl in Alex (rather than as an “identity”), the one who haunts her from the very outset, but also gives her reparative refuge.

At this point of the narrative is where Alex's “becoming girl” takes place (Deleuze and Guattari 276-82, Kennedy 193-214): marking the inception of a line of flight, she becomes for a good part of the narrative, a “fugitive” and the *figure* of the girl (193-98)—rather than the girl as *identity* and *representation* as attributed to her by the dominant familial and medical discourse—is what ultimately leads her, not without major traumatic violence, to a narrative resolution that is both personal and reconstitutive of the self. Indeed, after the “mirror scene”, she escapes through the window to her girlfriend's home, stays the night

away with her, escapes again and then is assaulted on the beach. Alex's girlfriend is indicative here of the emergence of the figure of the girl in Alex herself: her diegetically unnamed girlfriend—we only learn from the credits that her name is Roberta—plays also the narrative role of a premonitory character. In fact, she had anticipated this fugitive drift, in both her character and that of Alex's, as a forest roaming *figure* in the chasing scene of the opening sequence: the figure of the girl as fugitive, wandering and roving, but also as intensely persecutory (chasing/being chased) signals not only speed and movement, but also Sexuality itself.¹⁰

The film, in fact, opens with these persecutory images of Alex being chased by a “girl figure” until she falls: this opening sequence is crucial because it frames the film in an agonistic tension between sex/gender (identity) and sexuality (drives and becomings). The parallel editing contrasts these fast-paced edited shots of Roberta/Alex breathless, intense chase in the woods with images of maritime creatures trapped in the waters of Kraken's aquarium whilst we hear “Hembra”/“Female” as the first linguistic utterance of the soundtrack, thus associating binaristic one-sex interpellation with identity as a discursive-zoological trap. At the same time, it anticipates a later scene—analyzed above—in which Kraken asks whether the sea turtle coming from the underwater had been “identified”, by which he implicitly means “identified by its binaristically defined *one* sex”. In contrast with this scientific compulsion of sex identification through the violence of visibility—establishing the sex of sea turtles requires invasive scrutiny because it is not openly visible—the parallel

¹⁰The complex way in which the film problematizes the feminine and the masculine arises here, and could be discussed in relation to both the order of identity/representation, and perhaps more interestingly, at the level of the figural: critics have discussed these issues in different ways. Gleghorn's reading, for example, attends to how the film effectively critiques the othering of the feminine through the myths of the “monstrous” and “maritime”, whereas other interpretations criticize the obliteration of the feminine/“vaginal” in favor of the phallic in both the protagonist and the narrative of the film (Tretorola).

chase introduces movement, libido and sexuality through speed and fragmentation (body parts and objects embodying partial objects and drives). The chase recalls the Freudian interpretation of homosexuality, and could hence be read as having an anticipatory function in the film. If for Freud, paranoia was a “normal” defense mechanism of the ego against homosexuality as “threat”, then the persecutory figuring here has strong links with heteronormative constructions of (male) homosexuality. Its very form is gendered: Alex is haunted by a *girl* and the former has, in turn, to become herself a girl not only to conjure up the ghost of male, phallic-anal homosexuality (s/he had just penetrated Alvaro), but also to take up her subjectivizing line of flight out of the power relations established by the heterotopian closet. In other words, through the figure of the girl, Alex has become Sexuality itself (Deleuze and Guattari 276-82).¹¹ The opening scene stages this tension between the fixity of sex/gender identity and the transformative intensity of sexuality: the former associated with the traumatic violence of (in)visibility and the latter with a productive erotic ambivalence (between a sexually-charged paranoid threat and a creative, singular line of flight).

Parallel to this fugitive sequence in which Alex stays the night at Roberta’s and away from her parents, Kraken also escapes the family household to spend the night elsewhere. This happens, however, after the family dinner: he drives in the middle of the stormy night to find Juan (Scherer)—the local intersex man whom he had seen in his newspaper cuttings—and meets him in person in a petrol station, where he works. His first encounter with this intersex man takes place through the liminality provided by his car’s raindrop filled windscreen: rendered opaque by the rain, it is through the latter’s windscreen washing that a Kraken-positioned subjective camera “discloses” and “discovers” the intersex man’s real face. Here

¹¹For an interesting discussion of how homosexuality is hinted at in *XXY*, albeit in relation to Alvaro as a character and in a different interpretative direction, see Gleghorn.

again, the liminality of a (wind)screen opens up a narrative sequence that—temporally and symbolically parallel to that of the Alex/Roberta encounter—is similarly reparative, albeit this time vicariously, of the experiences of the (injured) queer self. In fact, Kraken gets to know Juan (Scherer) as a real human being when he goes to his home and learns about his present life as a married man with a son as well as his personal history of mutilation.

These two night-time parallel sequences of reparative encounters lead to the crucial encounter between Alex and her father the following morning on the beach, that is, in an open space outside the heteronormative domestic realm which they both escaped, but Alex decides to wander on her own, and carries on, without her father, her “heterotopian” journey that draws her away from home. However, her fugitive trajectory ends up in an assault by three macho-acting teenagers on the beach: the “figure of the girl” finds, thus, its symbolic limit in the very structural violence produced by the closet that the village represents and enacts. In an interesting parallel of reversals, these adolescents, like Alvaro, come to Alex in a boat, prompting in Alex as well, in an ironic re- *and* pre-iteration, *visibility as violence*, albeit in an inverted way if we compare it with Alvaro/Alex intersubjective investments. In a scene that has been read as visual “rape” (Zamostny 196-97), the intimidating teenagers subject Alex to a violently imposed and unsolicited visibility: her genitalia—which had already been constituted as “the content” of the village-wide all-proliferating secret after being established and protected by the famili(es)—have now become diegetically unveiled to the three boys, although not to the audience. Interestingly Alex is saved, in the middle of this incident, by Vando, her “traitor” friend who outed her in the first place: he protects and consoles her in the immediate aftermath of this traumatic event, resulting in a new teen-teen alliance being re-established, showing, once again, the heterotopian ambivalence of the village as closet space. The reparative resolution of this traumatic event culminates in a scene

of peer adolescent solidarity outwith the familial realm: the three adolescents—Roberta, Vando and Alvaro—are shown sitting on the ground, in the open air, outside Alex’s family home, after her assault. Their silent empathy and togetherness-in-adversity emphasizes a connection at a different level from that of the family gatherings: a connection that, whilst not transcending or overcoming the teenagers’ “intersubjective breakdown” (Zamostny 198-201), does operate, narratively, as an encounter. Even if this is certainly not a simple “communicative utopia” of going *beyond* the closet-imposed communication breakdown—there is no discussion of the issue amongst the teens—this real encounter lets emerge, first and foremost, a genuine solidarity that is not devoid of a certain antagonism (the “othered others” in the village are “us”).

This teen-teen solidarity, thus, takes place in a scene in which the three adolescents are *beside* each other within a heterotopian closet-imposed context: the heteronormative family-imposed “communication breakdown” in a field of “social indeterminacy” (Laclau, *The Rhetorical Foundations* 207-20) is what prompts for these antagonistically-constituted solidarities to emerge as a response to the dislocating event—the rape—that let emerge the core of their injured, traumatic selves (Žižek 249-59). The narrative resolution of closet-imposed violence through inter-adolescent and non-familial solidarity can be read as an incipiently emerging law of a radically different kind beyond the ban (Laclau, *The Rhetorical Foundations* 207-20): this incipiently emerging “alternative law”—the teens are now framed as a group outside the family home—expresses both solidarity and antagonism against a societal and familial-ideology imposed closet configuration, and is able to open up something

new beyond “the ban” itself, precisely besides these (shamed, injured) figures “under the ban of suspension”.¹²

In conclusion, it is her alliance with her three teenage friends as well as with her fraternal father—who went also “on the run” from the family “ritualistic” dinner—what saves Alex from the protagonist of Cather’s short story’s fate (suicide, death, solitude, isolation, social “alienation”) after her rape. As in Paul’s case, Alex in this sequence that starts with the mirror scene analyzed above, undergoes a process by which s/he is “released from prohibitive scrutiny”, whereby her shame-charged “body frees itself through its own dissolution” (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 166): through the violent, non-consented, public dissolution of an intimate, “closeted body”. However, unlike the suicidal fate that arrests and finally yields Paul’s agency (166), it is through *her collective* dealing with *the public* “prohibitive scrutiny” of her (intersex) body that Alex gains agency, and this is something that she achieves by means of embarking on her own, singular line of flight—one that is socially charged with alliances, solidarity, equivalence and antagonism. The dislocating heterotopian village was, thus, far from Cordelia Street (Cather): much more disturbingly enabling than those “normal” urban suburbs territorialized around the logics of the paranoid and the sacrificial, the very Oedipal family logics that haunts (queer) children and use them as their scapegoats (Penchaszadeh 159-71).

Furthermore, childhood as spectrality and as the necessary supplement of the political proper—the child’s status as the overtly exposed, sacrificial scapegoat, the hypervisible but silenced flipside of sovereign powers (167-71)—does not merely point to “utopianism” and liminality. It also points, quite importantly, to early-experienced antagonisms in the

¹²My reading differs in this respect with Tretorola’s analysis of the film, which emphasises the regulatory dimension of social spaces by the village as closet, as having an exclusively depoliticising and fundamentally repressive role in this film (367-68).

emergence of queers as subjects—and hence, in the very constitution of queer subjects, their processes of “subjectivation”: queers’ own personal making as subjectivized—loving and desiring—human beings *have to* go through negativity and antagonism.

Queer encounters in the space of the liminal or the spatial logic of *the beside*

The liminal sites analyzed here offer surfaces for material-symbolic inscriptions for these adolescents in their very processes of subjectivation as well as centrifugal passages that are not reduced to sedimented rituals, but where one might read the unsettling capacity for refusal, resistance and dislocation that play, escape, imagination and creativity offer. These processes of subjectivation through the lines of flight analyzed above are made possible by the heterotopian routes out of the power relations (Johnson 86) represented by all those familial one-gender utopianisms, those that did not *quite* work in the heterochronic village. Paradoxically, the very *literalization of the closet space into a place* (a village, a geographically relocated family, a bedroom-cage), the marking out of the closet into a delineated territory (the small, isolated coastal community), the emplacement of all the repressive, future-led utopias condensed by the metaphor of the closet into a concrete, enclosed heterotopian location is what allowed for the disturbing, relational, queer logics of the beside to arise in the teenage community.¹³

¹³We are dealing here with different ways of *spatially figuring* the queer in adolescent relationality. If dominant, future-oriented utopian space corresponds to a logic of the beyond and is ultimately regulated by the temporal logics of a narrative—in most cases, a verisimilar fable—heterotopian spaces have to do with what Sedgwick has referred to as “the irreducibly spatial positionality of *beside*”, able to distance us from narratives of origin (beneath, behind) and *telos* (beyond) (*Touching Feeling* 8; 67-91). Hostile to the enclosed, wholesome and totalizing narrative logic of the fable, the space of the heterotopian is queer not so much for what it promises (the beyond) but for what is already *within* it—beside and alongside—if we

At the very end of the film, the “seascape” takes over, once again, the full screen, indicating the possibility of queer utopia as a closure to Alex and Alvaro’s encounter and bond. Indeed, in this final scene Alvaro is wearing the turtle pendant—a symbol of their bonding—and the camera initially “couples” them in a two-shot from behind against the background of an intensely pale blue land-water horizon: Alex responds, however, in a rather aggressive way to Alvaro’s farewell. In a gesture that has been read as introjective of the violent, phallic look of the rapist boys (Zamostny 200), s/he exhibits this (violently) received gaze—the village-wide [persecutory] eyes that watch—by mirroring it. In so doing, she transforms her shame into a shaming performance against Alvaro that re-enacts the violent process of ambivalent (visual and verbal) objectification whilst displacing it from herself to her penis. “*Qué te da mas lástima, no verme más o no haberla visto. ¿Querés ver?*”, she utters while ostentating *only to Alvaro* her genitalia—invisible to the audience because the framing of the shot conceals them behind her legs—but linguistically directing his gaze to her penis [“haberla visto”]. Alvaro’s reacts by looking down in humiliation, the typical sign of shame as the pivotal affect that is transferred here, a transference of negative affect that is only possible on the basis of their connection and bonding. However symmetrical or violence-imitative this performance might seem—diegetically, for the characters involved—what this shame-originated, incipiently transformative performance (Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* 35-65) creates, is an open-ended, non-complacent deferral for the audience who never gets the visual gratification of the voyeur (Alvaro, the “visual rapists”) or the narrative one of the happy ending. More

consider that in heterotopian spaces, contradictory elements connect and repel *beside* each other, next to one another, around each other, but always in the outside (of each of us). Sedgwick’s “affective logics” of the beside can be understood here as facilitating encounters with the other other “*across*” the neighboring margins of genders and sexualities (*Tendencias* xii; 166-266), but at the very heart of real heterotopian sites (otherwise, (hetero)normatively regulated). If there is a queer utopian element in heterotopias one should find it in the irreducibly heterotopian positionality of the beside, the around and the across.

importantly for Alex, the experience and performance of public shame has been transformed into its reverse exhibitionist performance, a violence that might give way to other, deferred, perhaps non-violent performances to come. Paraphrasing Sedgwick, Alex's "transformational shame is performance" (*Touching Feeling* 38) and as such, it is, first and foremost, a moment of intense *spatialization*: a self-subjectivizing threshold "between performativity and performativity", between visual shame and exhibition (Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* 38), or in other words, the becoming spatial of the dislocating event (Laclau, *New Reflections* 41-44) that disrupts the latter's very temporality through her citing her rapists' shaming action into an absolute space: a space of performance (the bodily space of pure modality or enunciation). Reformulating the reconstitutive family-fleeing line of flight initiated after the mirror scene, Alex enters yet another subjectivizing threshold that opens up her emerging, reconstituting self as a *space* that is able to "draw her out of herself" (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 23) into yet another (exhibitionistic) performance, which is as disturbing to her *inner self* as it is challenging to her social environment: her closet-"protected" sense of home (Johnson 84). Her transformational shame is thus a spatializing, outward movement that disrupts any "sense of interiority" as defined in heteronormative formulations of utopian sexual/gendered selves, by means of creating, in herself and her everyday relational environment, a radically *other* space "against and outside" these familial future-regulated utopias (84; Edelman 13-18, 57-60).¹⁴ However, we never get to see either Alex's genitalia or a gender/sexual resolution of her/his character in the narrative: as pointed out by Butler (*Bodies That Matter* 164) with respect to Cather's Paul, there is no "final deciphering" of Alex as expected by the reader. However, unlike Cather's text (Location 28837), what the audience gets at the end of *XXY* is

¹⁴It is in this point where my reading differs from Zamostny's: even if I agree on the "introjection of violence", I read challenge, transformative agency and hope in the reversed reiteration of her shame-performance, considering the context of Alex's already violent personal and social conditions.

not *just* the bare exteriority of what the short story narrator calls the “picture-making mechanism” or its “disturbing visions” impersonally “flashing into black”, but Alex’s theatrical appropriation of this shame-producing machinery as well as her addressing it to Alvaro: namely, Alex’s gaze indicating the object of her now exhibited “shame”—the sheer performance of her eyes ostensibly citing those of her victimizers, iterating the very act of visibility as violence, albeit displacing it into a different, affect-laden context. As in Cather’s story, the paranoid “picture-making mechanism” has been symbolically “crushed” (28837), but unlike Cather’s ending, this has been achieved through a certain mirroring of “[t]he “eyes” that watch” (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 164) that is *not* at the expense of the protagonist’s life. Puenzo’s open-ending certainly avoids “autobiographical confession” (164): as in Butler’s analysis of Paul, by deferring both the look of the Other (the rapists’, the spectator’s) and of Alex’s, what is narratively deferred is a symbolic resolution of her sexual/gendered self. Even if refraining from offering a hermeneutic sexual deciphering, all these deferrals imply in *XXY* not a lonely mirroring of persecutory “watchfulness” (164) on the part of the protagonist, but effective *displacements* that take place at the level of the relational and socially visible: from shameful violence into exhibitionistic, *displaced* shaming performance, and from visible shame into the space of a new, non-normative self.

The last encounter of the pair takes place by the port, but leaves us with an ambiguous, open-ended final shot: the “deserted sea”, without a boat, without that piece of heterotopian emplacement enabling real encounters with “other others” that could enable Alex to assume a stronger relational agency beyond her family and the village-closet. Let us recall here that, as contradictorily defined as the mirror—a “placeless place”—the ship is “the heterotopia par excellence” (“Of Other Spaces” 27). The role of the boat is particularly significant in its sheer utopian/heterotopian ambivalence: if the boat is where Alvaro came to

Alex's coastal village, it is also the vessel that transported the three teenage rapists to the shore where they visually abuse Alex. Following Foucault's exemplary conception of ships as heterotopias par excellence insofar as they hold "dreams" (27), the boats in *XXY* figure the space that makes thinkable the possibility of queer love and friendship—as in the bondings Alex/Alvaro and Alex/Roberta—within and beside the closet, as well as, *in their very heterotopian ambivalence*, representing the vehicle that makes possible an intersex-phobic assault. Its political ambivalence lies in its evoking imagination and dreams, whilst simultaneously indicating the always-imminent invasive threat of the closet-like proliferating "secret" as its displaced traumatic core. The traumatic Real—the event as the sight of that which must/should not be seen—comes from a boat in *XXY*: the "visual rape" is nothing but a scrutiny, the violent, violating look that condemns her to an unsolicited compulsory visibility. Fröhlich (164) has insightfully formulated this heterotopian ambivalence as a tension between Alex's association of her genitals" "forced visibility with pain" and their "controlled invisibility with pleasure" (as in Alex/Alvaro sexual intercourse), and this is Alex's way of dealing with such an externally constructed "obscenity". The very same traumatic sight is, paradoxically, what leaves—this time, in Alvaro's eyes—in a boat. Narratively, the film is open-ended because heterotopias, unlike utopias, are not fables: they are open-ended.

However, the obvious growth of Alex's character points to a narrative that has reached a certain resolution and that at least at this personal, psychological level, is not open-ended:¹⁵ her verbalized decision to stop taking normalizing hormones, to *not to have to* choose one gender and face up to the small town's society within the patriarchal "regime of truth" once she has been outed by others. By the end of the film, Alex achieves relational agency through the *singular* way in which she rejects the oppressive limitations of the closet

¹⁵I am grateful to Fiona McIntosh (University of Edinburgh) for suggesting this possibility of reading.

imposed on her when she decides “not to change anything” and go back to school. “Not changing anything” in her new symbolic context—redefined or re-established by herself—implies changing “everything”: of course, not the dominant symbolic conditions of the village-closet—the closet does not magically expire when one comes out—but the way she decides to relate to those conditions, her own *articulatory practice* as agency.¹⁶ Her self-affirmative, challenging response to Alvaro’s comment on the impossibility of being both female and male (“*A mí me vas a decir lo que puedo o no puedo ser*”) or her elaborated displacement of her father’s “liberal” offer of sex/gender choice by reformulating the very definition of freedom “beside” and aside a pre-given set menu of “scroll-down options” (“*Y si no hubiera nada que elegir*”) are just instances in which her agency is expressed. These are creative responses that speak of agency. Would this have been possible without the affective relationality of the beside, the ambivalent violence of visibility and her desiring “becoming-girl”? The value of the heterotopian remote village lies in this growth impelled by creativity and the logics of the beside.

Whatever the future awaits for Alex and Alvaro in this open-ended film, the life-changing significance of this queer encounter with “another other” points to teen-teen relationality as a condition of possibility for adolescent agency. This queer encounter shows,

¹⁶For a clear exposition of how queer agency is inseparable from political articulation, speech, silence and modes of speaking, see Castro Varela, Dhawan and Engel 17-20. For the sake of clarity, let me add that *articulatory practices* are not understood here in the structural sense (by *purely* paradigmatic selection and syntagmatic combination of a *pre-given menu or context* of choices as in classical liberalism, theories of rational choice or popular divulgation of structural linguistics), but in Laclau’s and Mouffe’s sense of a transformative practice *within the discursive conditions of a field of social indeterminacy*. Articulatory practices are thus transformative not because they might contribute to changes in dominant ideologies or norms, but because they transform both *the very identity* of the “new” element (or subject) that is articulated—even if through reproduction or reinforcement of dominant norms—as well as *the socio-symbolic field* in which it is articulated.

in other words, not just the otherness of teenage childhood in Alvaro or Alex, but also the otherness of the bullied, shame-constituted, queer adolescent, another queer other (Alvaro). Furthermore, the encounter renders visible the emergence of teenage queerness as simultaneously “otherness” *and* as an “objectless”, *non-identificatory*¹⁷ (Lury 13-15) way of relating to the other *beside* us, rather than behind, beyond or in front of us.

¹⁷ Unlike secondary narcissism–based as it is on processes of identification–non-identificatory relationships are objectless and hence closer to queer subject formation. In Freudian terms, they correspond to *primary* narcissistic processes.

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