

# “Por qué será que los putos se divierten así?”: Cynicism and Sexuality in Bizzio’s “Cinismo”

Herbert J. Brant

Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI)

**INTRODUCTION.** Much has been written about Lucía Puenzo’s 2007 award-winning film *XXY*, a film that, as Kokalov smartly notes, is a “traducción radical” of a short story written by her spouse, Sergio Bizzio, entitled “Cinismo,” and published in his collection, *Chicos* (2004). Although Puenzo’s film has generated numerous academic studies that focus primarily on the personal, social, and cultural implications that arise from the revelation that the adolescent protagonist is intersexual (e.g., studies by Amícola, Cabral, Clark, Estrada-López, Frohlich, and Whitehead), relatively little has been written about the original story and how it expresses a significantly different message by means of a highly facetious and sarcastic narrator.

For those who are familiar with the film, but not familiar with the story that serves as the inspiration for the film, the following summary will show how different the two versions are. The story focuses on the events that unfold at a vacation home in Punta del Este, Uruguay. Two upper-middle class Argentine couples, Muhabid Jasán, his wife, Érika, and their 15-year old son Álvaro, spend several days at a beach house with Néstor and Suli Kraken, and their 12-year old daughter Rocío. While the parents spend their days amusing themselves with different adult leisure activities, such as drinking, smoking pot, and engaging in smart conversations on controversial subjects, the teenagers are off negotiating the complexities of

sex. Rocío approaches Álvaro aggressively as the initiator, asking him if he would sleep with her because she wants to lose her virginity, and would rather do it with someone with whom she is not in love and whom she doesn't even like. As time passes, Álvaro becomes more turned on by this girl who taunts and belittles him, and he goes to her bedroom one evening as their parents talk in the living room. As they begin to have sex, Rocío pleasures Álvaro from behind, which puts him in ecstasy, but prevents him from seeing that she getting ready to penetrate him with her penis. At this moment, her father suddenly appears, and interrupts them. After this failed attempt, Rocío is no longer interested in sex with Álvaro because she has inexplicably fallen in love with him, and since she will only suffer emotionally if she has sex with him, her desire is channelled into watching him masturbate. His desire, if he cannot have sex with her, is simply to see what is between her legs. Now that Álvaro is in on Rocío's "secret," and the relationship between the adults has become less and less cordial, the Jasáns decide to leave earlier than expected, and the Krakens hold a special farewell dinner. The tension between the adolescents intensifies, and when the Krakens drive everyone to the port, Álvaro finally has a second alone with Rocío outside, and she lets him see her penis for just a split second. The story end with an image of Rocío, tears in her eyes, walking back to the car with her parents.

**CYNICISM AS A CONCEPT.** Part of what makes this story so interesting for the reader is the extraordinarily cynical narration and the difficult task of interpretation that it asks the reader to perform. At many points in the narration, the events, characters and situations are presented in such a sarcastic and facetious tone that layers of exceptional depth and richness complicate the narration. The cynicism of the title is a central feature of the content and form,

but ultimately becomes a tool for interpreting the ambiguity of the text. But the cynicism of the text is not of the classic philosophical kind; it is post-modern in nature.

In modern terms, cynicism is often used to describe an approach to the world characterized by a number of negative traits, such as distrustfulness, hopelessness, ridicule, pessimism, and disillusionment. Most frequently, people call “cynical” an attitude of distrust of others’ motives as being duplicitous or selfish. So-called “cynical” people seem to lack any faith or hope in a better tomorrow, and their attitude is often accompanied by a harsh judgment of others’ naive sense of hope as thoroughly inappropriate, or unjustifiably positive, and therefore, deserving of their ridicule and mockery. The skepticism and distrust of socially accepted values is often connected to the cynic’s perception that high expectations are utterly in conflict with the unpleasant modern reality surrounding us. As Bewes notes in his book on contemporary British politics, *Cynicism and Postmodernity*, “the modern cynic is apathetic and introspective, resigned to, rather than reveling in his or her experience of alienation. Cynicism denotes a refusal to engage with the world as much as a disposition of antagonism towards it, a flight into solitude and interiority and an abnegation of politics on the basis of its inauthenticity. Modern cynicism is a condition of disillusion, which can appear as a temperament of aestheticism, or even nihilism” (1). Ultimately, cynicism comes as a result of a deep and powerful sense of frustration, resentment, or disappointment that sets in when hopes and expectations are dashed by the unpleasant reality of the modern world.

In Bizzio’s story, cynicism is pervasive, and it is fundamental to understanding the characters, the plot development, and the narration itself as it is presented by a deeply sarcastic omniscient third-person narrator. The narrator, in fact, foregrounds a self-consciousness that calls attention to itself and, as Mullaly notes, its distance from the characters and events being described (209). When the narrator initially presents Muhabid

Jasán as belonging to the “interesting” category of people, and his wife Érika as a woman “con inquietudes” (7), he uses quotation marks to highlight the words that make a judgment on the characters. Further on, he indicates that Érika works as an economist, but who has a long list of varied interests that go from the conventional to the frivolous: politics, botany, literature, interior design, graphology, space travel, Andean folklore, Zen Buddhism, UFOs, and health foods (7-8). Clearly, the list is intended to convey to the reader that she is unfocused, or “artsy,” or even deluded. The fact that Muhabid is a composer, but a composer of *film* music who writes for commercially successful films, obliquely criticizes him as more interested in money than art (8). Only later in the story does the narrator report that his wife thinks of him as lacking in talent, and someone who gets by on his efficiency and reliance on technique (14). In short, the narrator offers sarcastic descriptions by means of highly facetious and over-precious phrasing that is meant to ridicule and demean the interests and qualities of the characters. And due to this derisive, mocking, or contemptuous narrative voice, the reader is consistently forced to wonder whether what is being narrated is being expressed seriously and sincerely, or facetiously and duplicitously. The reader must, therefore, often doubt the reliability of what is being described, because the narrator is conveying multiple, sometimes opposing, possibilities for interpreting the words that make up the narration.

Given the duplicitous nature of the narration, the cynicism of the title, then, seems to suggest a finely-tuned response to a post-modern world in which the relativity of even the most dependable black-and-white categories has ceased to conform to strict and reliable parameters. In other words, the cynicism of Bizzio’s story characterizes a world where nothing seems to be what we thought it was, where the foundations of our reality are continually violated by the complexity at the heart of things, where seemingly everything is

faceted (facetious) by being one thing as well as other things, and even its opposite, all at the same time.

**CYNICISM AS RESPONSE TO DUALITY.** If we begin with the two principal characters in the story, Álvaro and Rocío, the reader cannot help but notice that they are described by the narrator in contradictory, as well as unappealing terms. Álvaro, who represents the very specific category of “el sensible espontáneo,” stands out because he cannot be interesting, but instead repels people with his unfocused curiosity, his ability to burst into tears easily, and his emotional and physical clumsiness. And while he possesses these less than attractive qualities, he is, nevertheless, filled with good intentions.

Of even more conflicting traits is Rocío, who exhibits a “generalized physical defect” which is especially disturbing if one views her “while sober”: “es hermosa por partes y horrible en su conjunto. Se diría que da la impresión de haber sido barajada más que concebida” (8). At one point, the narrator even notes that “Rocío era el Frankenstein de un esteta perverso, un monstruito facetado” (18). Rocío is literally a creature of irreconcilable dualities: beautiful in parts, but ugly in totality; part child, part adult; female in gender appearance, but with a male sex organ. However, the one good thing about Rocío, as Álvaro’s father, Muhabid, comments, is that her personality does not match her exterior —if it did, she would be schizophrenic— but luckily, she was merely “la chica más cínica que había conocido” (9).

The four parents, on a less obvious level, are also portrayed by strongly conflicting characteristics which indicate that their youthful idealism and interests have been substituted by deceitful and hypocritical attitudes now that they have adolescent children of their own. With them, pretense and false attitudes are constantly on display and have become the mode

through which they live their lives. As I will discuss later, the falseness and contradiction among the parents are exposed by the narrator as he reveals their innermost thoughts on how much each couple dislikes the other, and how their relationships are almost wholly lacking in love or affection.

**DUALITY AS INVERSION.** While it could be said that most people, situations, and cognitive processes display complexity and duality, Bizzio's story takes duality, duplicity and duplicitousness to a level where dualism actually becomes *inversion* in nearly every aspect of human interaction and identity: attitudes, behaviors, and even bodies. For example, from the beginning of the story, Álvaro is presented to the reader as being totally distinct from the usual expectations we have of 15-year old adolescents. As a strongly emotional and sensitive type, his masculinity and his identity as a heterosexual male is thrown immediately into question. There is something very queer about him. In Western culture, gender conformity and sexuality are inextricably linked. As a result, compulsory heterosexuality as a determining factor in the definition of a masculine male person requires an indispensable accompanying component that one might call "compulsory homophobia." Modern social and cultural restrictions on male sexuality, as Foucault and others have demonstrated, cannot function without the complementary force provided by the presence of non-heterosexuals. Reeser summarizes the dynamic by stating that "a key aspect of power's normalizing effect is the constructing of an abnormal other. For in order to create a norm, discourse must create or invent an anti-norm, which implies that the norm is the norm by opposition" (31-32). Hegemonic culture, therefore, conflates heterosexuality with masculinity in men, and in so doing, has defined non-heterosexuality as anomalous and, consequently, anti-masculine. Álvaro, therefore, as a "sensible espontáneo," by definition, becomes suspect in his sexuality.

And by the third page of Bizzio's story, the reader learns that his father already "sospechaba que Álvaro era gay" (9). Employing a term as it was used frequently at the turn of the last century, Álvaro's "inversion" can be said to represent, in a way, a person with "dual gender," often cited in popular psychoanalytic and criminological texts as "anima mulieris in corpore virile inclusa" or a "female spirit trapped inside a male body." Such a dual gendered individual, it was believed, was the explanation for homo-sexuality, when the female spirit inside the male body sought its "natural" complementary opposite in other males.

But in a truly queer and unexpected narrative turn, the author elaborates an amazing inversion-of-the-inversion when Álvaro and Rocío attempt to have sex for the first time. In contrast to Álvaro's inversion in terms of sexuality, the author has him losing his virginity with a girl who is not simply or merely a girl, but an intersexed person who, at least in this point in her life, identifies as female, but who possesses male genitals. Rocío's inverted gender and biological identity, the narration suggests, has made her a stunningly cynical and bitter person because of her disconformity with social expectations and norms. Like many non-conforming persons before her—those that had been forced to maintain a secret identity in terms of gender, sexuality, and biological sex—Rocío has learned to respond to her situation with a protective layer of cynicism that keeps her from being even more disappointed, threatened, or harmed by a world in which she does not fit neatly or comfortably.

To add further to the motif of inversion, the scene when Álvaro and Rocío attempt to have sex actually turns out to be a oddly inverted Freudian "primal scene." Instead of a child who witnesses the act of sex between her or his parents, in Bizzio's story, it is the a parent who witnesses a sexual encounter of his child. But in stark contrast to the usual shock that parents might experience if they witness their child having sex, the scene is further inverted when Rocío's father, Kraken, sees his daughter prepare to penetrate a boy with her penis, which

converts the moment into one in which his daughter has inverted her identity into its supposed opposite. When Kraken yells, “¡Chicos!”, the two jump up, and as the narrator describes it, “le apuntaron con sus lanzas” (20). Contrary to Freud’s primal scene in which a child views the traumatic reality of how his adult parents differ biologically and how coitus occurs, in Bizzio’s story, although Kraken is surprised, it is not because he did not know the reality of his child’s body, but rather that her inversion had happened so soon, and now he will need to deal with this unusually difficult situation. It is important to note here that when the teenagers stop doing what they are doing, Kraken simply walks away from the room, and decides not to discuss it with anyone. Instead of responding with anger or hysteria, or attempting to shame or punish the kids, —and here I disagree with Kokalov that Kraken responds “en una obvia demostración del poder patriarcal que no puede permitir el tipo de desviación de las normas tradicionales” (209)— Kraken’s level of calm acceptance of the reality of their desires is actually noteworthy. His response, however, does inspire the narrator to report Kraken’s thoughts in a climax of snide and sarcastic cynicism: “Siempre había sabido que eso iba a ocurrir... Después de todo, ¿qué tenía de inquietante que su hija hermafrodita y menor de edad le rompiera el culo al hijo de su invitado?” (21).

In addition to the unusually casual way in which Kraken responds to the scene of his intersexual daughter preparing to penetrate their guests’ son, an earlier, and less pivotal inverted primal scene occurs towards the beginning of the story, when Álvaro’s mother, Érika, see him masturbating in the woods near the house, “con la malla en las rodillas y un dedo metido en el culo. Fue ese dedo lo que la hizo llamar: —¡Álvaro!” Knowing that his mother had seen him, Álvaro simply pretends to urinate, but Érika, horrified, thinks to herself, “Lo único raro era el dedo en el culo” (15). In a manner similar to Kraken, Érika could not have been surprised that her 15-year old son masturbated frequently, but her shock comes from the



realization that her son is excited by anal stimulation which, by itself, does not indicate anything about his sexual orientation, but it does reinforce the common, but mistaken, notion that men who enjoy anal sex are automatically classified as homosexual. In contrast, then, to the scene which Kraken witnesses, Érika has a sudden confirmation that the gender and sexual identity of her son are different from what she had hoped. Clearly, while her artless husband had long suspected that their son was gay, Érika now sees that he was right, and she views it not only with shame, but also with a cynical dose of disappointment and disillusionment: “hay que reconocer que no es lo mismo para una madre, por más culta y sensible que sea, ver a su hijo masturbándose que verlo humillado con el dedo en el culo...” (15).

DINNER SCENE. Bizzio’s story comes to a close once the reality sets in that the entire vacation visit has been one long exercise in frustration for everyone involved. While the adults come to understand that they do not like each other —Muhabid, at one point realizes that “las mujeres habían empezado a competir. Mentalmente, se persignó. Podían llegar a ser extremadamente ridículas e hirientes” (21), and Kraken recognizes that “el malestar que sentía estaba relacionado con Muhabid y Érika y no tanto con lo que acababa de ver en el cuarto” (21), and Érika mentally notes that any interest she had in the others was reduced to courtesy and later purely to conversation “(con permantes relámpagos de odio explícito allá y aquí). Lo único que estaba en armonía era el hecho de que todo era mutuo” (22)—, and while the teenagers are caught in a complicated jumble of desires, fascinations, and contradictory emotions such as attraction and repulsion, infatuation and disdain, the parents decide to put an end to everyone’s misery and cut the trip short. To celebrate, they arrange a farewell dinner which serves to put all of their disappointments, dissatisfactions, and sarcasm on boldly cynical display.

For me, the dinner scene sums up exquisitely the duplicitous nature of the story, and the discomfort and distress that results from living in a world that seems to have completely lost its reliability; a relativistic, post-modern world where nothing will ever again be as it seems. Of all the conversation at the table, the narrator selects one anecdote to encapsulate the theme of the story. The anecdote, started off by Érika, tells of a recent summer when she and Muhabid, Álvaro, and one of his friends spend their vacation on a Brazilian island. While speaking, Muhabid adds details to her story, as if she were telling only facet of it. For example, when Érika says that Álvaro's friend has a "problemita mental," Muhabid corrects her by saying that the boy has the mental capacity of an eight-year old child, and that, significantly, Álvaro "adores him." Érika continues the story by asking if Álvaro remembered how his little friend had a "relapse" and how difficult it was for them to be on that island with a boy in such a delicate mental state. What had originally been just a "problemita" has now been characterized as a psychological crisis. But to make matters worse, the island they were staying on was filled with "putos" who were having a flamboyantly good time while the Jasáns were stuck tending to a boy who was suffering from an unexplained critical episode. Suli Kraken then wonders aloud "Por qué será que los putos se divierten así?", and adds "Yo soy amiga de unos cuantos putos muy inteligentes, que deberían estar angustiados, y sin embargo..." (30). Érika takes up the point and notes that there were lots of parents with children on the island, and all of them felt terrible from the injustice of watching fags enjoying themselves, while the heterosexual parents stood on the sidelines, only able to watch from a distance. Suli, noting the bitter injustice of the situation, comments "Qué feo que te pase una cosa así [...]. Uno ahí lleno de hijos, o con un invitado mogólico, como te pasó a vos, y ellos bailando ajenos a todo. No, no es justo..." (31). To bring the anecdote to an amusing close, Érika states that she spent the week wondering what would be the perfect punishment for fags

who enjoy themselves like that, but that she couldn't come up with one. Kraken finally speaks up and says "Yo les prohibiría el equipo de música," and everyone at the table laughs.

While the anecdote, on one level, seems monstrously callous and cynical, given that the parents are aware of the sexual and gender non-conformity of their own children, it takes the reader a moment to consider whether the adults are revealing their true feelings, or are speaking in a purely facetious manner for humorous effect, or if they are combining the real with the fake, the sincere with the sarcastic. It seems likely that the adults are willfully exaggerating the sense of self-sacrifice that parents must accept when they have children, and that they are honestly resentful of those who do not seem to have as many responsibilities as they, as parents, do, but the choice of extremely offensive words such as "putos" and "mogólico" indicate that they cannot be speaking seriously. The response is not truly homophobic, but suggests rather that the vestiges of the ingrained intolerance of Argentine society have been finally subverted into a joke, a punch line, a ridiculously antiquated way of thinking. The phrase I chose as the title of this presentation, it seems to me, nicely illustrates a certain type of progress that allows the parents to respond in such conflicted, ambivalent terms as they attempt to deal with the insecurity of a world in which some boys are attracted to other boys, and some girls have male genitals.

**CONCLUSION.** The line between clearly delineated discursive tones is not always clear, and, it seems to me that the dinner-scene anecdote not only crystalizes the cynicism of the characters and the story as a whole, but also connects powerfully to the anxiety that has characterized modern societies in the past couple of decades with regard to the question of rights for people who have not been considered worthy of the same rights enjoyed by other

citizens: those who have not fit neatly into very rigid and narrow definitions of what is appropriate or acceptable in terms of gender, sexuality, or biological sex.

In Bizzio's story, a generation of adults must finally come to grips with the reality of the 21st century, in a nation that has undergone enormous socio-cultural changes since its return to democracy in 1983. Their children, in literal and figurative terms, represent the newest generation of Argentines, the ones who will be clamoring not just for tolerance, but for full acceptance in society. Several years after the appearance of Bizzio's story and Puenzo's film, Argentina has joined the most progressive of nations in passing marriage equality and gender identity laws on a federal level. In spite of the cynicism that is so characteristic of post-modern Western societies in this social-media saturated, instant telecommunications world, Bizzio's story ironically illustrates that progress is still possible and that the younger generation of Argentines may eventually have less need for protective layers of cynicism when it comes to their gender, sexual and biological identities.

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