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Excluded Middle?

Bisexuality in
Doña Herlinda y su hijo

In late 1994 I gave a paper on the cinema of Jaime Humberto Hermosillo at the queer studies conference at the University of Iowa, and in it used the word *bisexual* to describe the character Rodolfo, the son in *Doña Herlinda y su hijo* (Doña Herlinda and her son).¹ In one of those comments from the audience for which one is forever grateful, someone (still unknown to me) asked where the bisexuality was in Rodolfo and in the film. I had thought the answer was transparent because by the end of the film he is married and the father of a son and also still involved in a passionate relationship with the musician Ramón. But several more viewings of the film—and a reading of the contentious but not overly persuasive book by Marjorie Garber, *Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life*—have returned me to the question from the audience, for Hermosillo's 1984 film, like the more recent *Wedding Banquet*, posits the gay male relationship as primary and the heterosexual marriage as a screen created as a response to parental pressure.

The late 1970s and early 1980s were a moment of effervescence for the

nascent gay liberation movement in Mexico, with the emergence of small but vibrant groups, the Frente Homosexual de Acción Revolucionaria (FHAR) in Mexico City and Grupo Orgullo Homosexual de Liberación (GHOL) in Guadalajara, and the forging of international connections between the Mexican activists and their U.S. counterparts, particularly in San Francisco.² Luis Zapata had published *El vampiro de la Colonia Roma* in 1979 (later translated as *Adonis García*), José Joaquín Blanco published his important essay "Ojos que da pánico soñar" in 1981, and the FHAR was publishing *Política sexual: Cuadernos del Frente Homosexual de Acción Revolucionaria*, the first (undated) issue of which circulated in three thousand copies.

Before 1984 Hermosillo had made at least one implicitly homoerotic film, the 1974 *El cumpleaños del perro* (The dog's birthday). It concerns the murder of a young wife by her athlete husband and the protection granted him by a former employer, who eventually murders his own wife when she protests too loudly that her husband has become an accomplice to the first crime. There is nothing overtly sexual about the relation between the two men, and some quite explicitly sexual situations between the young athlete and his new wife. Yet the emotional core of the film is clearly the bond between the athlete and the singularly unattractive older man. As Francisco Sánchez notes in his essay on Hermosillo, at the time the film came out he and other critics were uncertain what to call that bond. He quotes from a review that he himself wrote at the time: "Hay una posibilidad de que los protagonistas de *El cumpleaños del perro* estén señalados por una inclinación homosexual, pero también hay otras muchas posibilidades: relación padre-hijo, sentimiento fraterno, camaradería viril o, simple y sencillamente, afinidad electiva de dos machos mexicanos" (It is possible that the protagonists of *The Dog's Birthday* are marked by a homosexual inclination, but other possibilities also exist: a father-son relationship, a fraternal feeling, virile camaraderie or, simply, the elective affinity of two Mexican machos),³ a comment that Sánchez immediately qualifies as "Tonterías, yo sólo le estaba dando vueltas a la simulación, no queriendo aceptar lo que era por demás evidente, que Hermosillo nos había obsequiado la primera película gay de nuestro cine" (Pure foolishness: I was just going round and round in a pretense, not willing to accept what was more than obvious, that Hermosillo had given us the first gay film in our cinema).⁴ But although gay subtexts were present in this and several others of Hermosillo's 1970s films, *Doña Herlinda* looks in retrospect like a response to the "coming-out" narratives of the post-Stonewall period, which impacted strongly in Mexico as elsewhere, a filmic example of which is the 1982 *Making Love*.⁵ But these narratives are inflected by Hermosillo with a Mexican twist, here pro-

vided by the dominating (and perhaps domineering) presence of an archetypal Mexican mother, Doña Herlinda.

Rodolfo, though he may seem the “macho” of the gay couple, is a weak figure pulled in opposite directions by the two strong individuals in his life, his lover Ramón and his mother Doña Herlinda. Ramón says to him at one point, “Define yourself,” but Doña Herlinda has already defined her son as “perfectly ambidextrous.” Garber reminds us of the connection in the early Wilhelm Fliess and Sigmund Freud theories of bisexuality between handedness and sexual orientation, so Doña Herlinda is calling on strong cultural models when she asserts—surreptitiously, as always—her son’s “native” bisexuality. Her precise statement is that he was born left-handed but that she made him into a perfect ambidexter; his bride’s family has already confessed that Olga, the bride-to-be, is left-handed (which would imply lesbianism in the same old theories, an idea hinted at when Olga quickly shifts from skirts to pants).

The sexual politics in the gay couple are set out fairly overtly early in the film. Rodolfo is portrayed with deliberate touches of the filmic image of the famous film actor Jorge Negrete (whom he somewhat resembles),⁶ though updated with a beeper in his belt: he wears cowboy boots and white pants, and his appearances in the film, beginning with the opening street scene in which he crosses from the plaza in front of the cathedral of Guadalajara toward the boardinghouse where Ramón lives, are frequently enlivened with the mariachi music about Guadalajara and Jalisco, the very songs sung in so many films by Negrete, considered the very archetype of the macho Mexican male.⁷ In the early scene in the boardinghouse, Rodolfo explodes with jealousy at Ramón’s friendship with another boarder, Eduardo, who is shown in one scene carving wood and in another knocks on Ramón’s door to ask for the return of his hammer. Ramón will have none of Rodolfo’s implication that he is attracted to Eduardo: “Es bien buga,” he says. Now *buga* (*bugarrón* in the Caribbean) is an equivocal term in Mexican and Caribbean slang; the new *Oxford Spanish Dictionary* defines it as “straight,” but a fuller translation would be “straight-acting, but willing to fuck gay men.” In working-class Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America (and in working-class New York at least until 1930, as shown by the research of George Chauncey), sexual identity has more to do with roles played than with the sex of the partners; on this point see the eloquent article by Tomás Almaguer.⁸ Ramón is saying that he is interested in being “used as a woman” not by a “straight” man but in a gay relationship; he is defining himself, that is, as an “international,” someone whose maps of sexual identity have been redrawn according to modern U.S. and European models.⁹ Interestingly, he is apparently of a lower class background than

Rodolfo,¹⁰ who resolutely refuses the “international” categories, and whose behavior throughout the film is marked by gender and class privilege. What Almaguer, following Carrier, calls the “bisexual escape hatch”¹¹ shapes Rodolfo’s resistance to the imposed “international” sexual categories, which seem to demand that he “come out” or “define himself” as gay.

And yet things are not so simple in the gay couple. Were the “Mexican” or “Latin American” sexual mapping as dominant as Almaguer and others have held, we would expect that Rodolfo would consistently take the “active inserter” role, while Ramón would be cast into the “anal receptive, *pasivo* sexual role.”¹² Given the type-casting of Rodolfo as Jorge Negrete and Ramón as a long-haired, pretty, smooth ephebe, it is no surprise that in one early scene in the film Rodolfo is cast as the top, but a later scene unequivocally shows him as the bottom (although in both scenes the men are shown only from the waist up). This looks like “international” behavior, which would demand a remapping and renaming of Rodolfo as gay. But Rodolfo escapes anyway, through the emphatic public devices of marriage and fatherhood.

The straight couple in the film, Rodolfo and Olga, also proves more complicated than first meets the eye. Though there are a few embraces or gestures of Rodolfo’s arm around Olga’s shoulder, there is relatively little physical passion there. And Olga confirms in a conversation with Ramón that for her too this has been a marriage of convenience, to get away from dictatorial parents (or, as she puts it, to go from the *dictadura* [harsh dictatorship] of her parents to the *dictablanda* [soft dictatorship] of Doña Herlinda). Olga so quickly moves from a rather severe skirt and blazer ensemble to pants suits with ties and even jeans, and is so emphatically interested in pursuing a career, volunteer work with Amnesty International, and her studies (of German of all things, seemingly in response to her father’s foreign accent) that she is decisively rejecting the role of the submissive, martyred Mexican wife and mother. She is a “new woman” in an explicitly international mode, while her husband clings to an earlier model of Mexican male identity.

Garber, in one of the few persuasive moments in her book, has argued that bisexual plots always involve triangles, and that the third side of the triangle is often the most interesting. In this case, the relationship that emerges between Olga and Ramón is fascinating. Connected only through Rodolfo, they forge a friendship or complicity that is reminiscent of the women’s pictures of the forties, and indeed the gender ambiguities are considerable. Ramón is the more feminine of the two, while Olga in her ties and pants suits plays a very butch number to his (though at the end of the film, during the baptism, they are dressed the same, in white jackets, ties, and

blue slacks, their haircuts similar). The scenes in which the two look radiantly into the cradle are in ironic counterpoint to Rodolfo, the biological father of the baby, who is out in the patio reciting a poem to his mother and her guests. Ramírez Berg, commenting on this relationship, declares: "There's one gentle scene like this after another in the film, and they accumulate to depict a new social order based on the politics of cordial communal interest and mutual respect";¹³ his reading no doubt takes Hermosillo too straight, since the director undoes his utopian solutions with cognitive dissonances—here, the gender reversal that casts Olga as butch and Ramón as femme, in contradiction to so much that is explicit elsewhere in the film. Indeed, it is to Ramón that Olga confesses, "Siempre deseo cosas contradictorias" (I always desire contradictory things), a statement that bears as much on Rodolfo as on herself.

The poem Rodolfo is reciting, meanwhile, is Manuel Acuña's "Nocturno" (a poem he earlier memorized in the sauna with the help of Ramón, who seems to have a better memory for poetry than he does, despite his pretensions as a "declamador"). This poem by the Mexican romantic poet is famous for its association with the poet's suicide in 1873, and the dedication of it to Rosario de la Peña has spawned the persistent theory that Acuña committed suicide after being rejected by Rosario. In this context, though, what is most jarring about the poem is the poet's yearning for a world where he would share his life with his beloved Rosario and also with his beloved and saintly mother (to whom he dedicates a series of other poems). The middle stanzas of the poem, read by Rodolfo with great emotion at the end of the film, are

A veces pienso en darte mi eterna despedida,
borrarte en mis recuerdos y hundirte en mi pasión;
mas si es en vano todo y el alma no te olvida,
¿qué quieres tú que yo haga, pedazo de mi vida,
qué quieres tú que yo haga con este corazón? . . .

¡Qué hermoso hubiera sido vivir bajo aquel techo,
los dos unidos siempre y amándonos los dos;
tú siempre enamorada, yo siempre satisfecho,
los dos una sola alma, los dos un solo pecho,
y en medio de nosotros, mi madre como un dios!

(Sometimes I think of saying goodbye to you forever
erasing you from my memories and sinking you into my passion
but if it is all in vain and the soul does not forget
what do you want me to do, piece of my life,
what do you want me to do with this heart?

How beautiful it would have been to live under that roof,
the two of us united forever and loving one another;
you always in love, I always satisfied,
the two of us a single soul, the two a single heart,
and between us, my mother like a god!¹⁴

This melodramatic lyric is worthy of being transformed into a bolero or *canción ranchera* of the kind sung by Lucha Villa earlier in the film, in the scene in which Doña Herlinda lends her handkerchief to the weeping Ramón, so eloquently discussed by José Quiroga in "(Queer) Boleros of a Tropical Night."¹⁵ If the Acuña poem is dedicated implicitly in the film to Ramón (rather than to Rodolfo's wife, Olga), Hermosillo is playing here with multiple ironies. What was impossible in the Mexico of 1873, the coexistence of passionate love with the bourgeois family, and is posed as a utopian dream of a home with both the beloved Rosario and the beloved mother is made real in the film. Rodolfo has it all: a household where he shares life simultaneously with Ramón and with Olga. Ramón is his "compadre" by virtue of being the godfather of the son at the baptism, and is more obviously paternal in his relation to his godson than is the biological father himself. And all of this in a household presided over, administered, by Doña Herlinda herself. When Rodolfo and Olga return from their honeymoon in Hawaii, a period during which Ramón toyed with finding his own way into the gay community but is prevented from doing so by the ever-meddling Doña Herlinda, it is she who proposes the ultimate wedding present for the complicated ménage: architectural drawings showing various new rooms added to the house, including a tower room where Ramón can practice his French horn. The already opulent house must be quite literally expanded into the walled garden to accommodate the new extended family, and all of this at the initiative of the matriarch.

So overpowering, indeed, is Doña Herlinda that one begins to wonder who is in charge of the complex relationships between Ramón, Rodolfo, and Olga. When Ramón dances with a girl at the resort in Chapala so as to annoy Rodolfo (who does indeed become visibly jealous), Doña Herlinda intervenes by saying that *she* is too jealous of Ramón to allow him to dance with other women. When Ramón is tempted to pick up a man during Rodolfo and Olga's honeymoon in Hawaii, Doña Herlinda's presence again interferes. Similarly, Rodolfo seems weak and indecisive when his mother is in action. Ramón's heartfelt cry—"Definite"—uttered when Rodolfo's engagement to Olga is being defined by others, is the closest we come to a conventional gay liberation narrative in the film. Doña Herlinda, however, proceeds by refusing to define her terms; her only reference to bisexuality

as noted above, comes when she calls Rodolfo “perfectly ambidextrous.” It is precisely because of her refusal to define the relationships taking place under her roof that their polymorphous perversity can flourish.¹⁶ Stephen O. Murray calls the arrangements worked out in the film “more wish-fulfillment (a fairy tale?) than representative, even of the upper class,”¹⁷ and indeed Joseph Carrier’s says of his some seventy-five informants, mostly in Guadalajara (though of a lower class background than Rodolfo and his mother), that “none of my respondents has looked upon homosexual encounters as behavior generally acceptable to his family, nonhomosexual friends, or to society at large.”¹⁸

Doña Herlinda y su hijo transgresses gay cultural expectations as much as it tries to educate straight audiences. The “families we choose”¹⁹ in this film are annoyingly conventional, perhaps, but that seems to be Hermsillo’s point: that for an utterly normal and unimaginative gay (or perhaps bisexual) man like Rodolfo, pleasing his mother is the safest way of pleasing himself. Ramón and Olga, the more sympathetic of the younger generation in the film, clearly turn the bizarre situation to their mutual advantage. The fag hag friend of Ramón’s at the conservatory is scandalized by the conventional nature of her friend’s dreams, but he seems happy with the panoramas that open for him in the new house. And Doña Herlinda can preside over the entire arrangement with poise and self-possession: she knows that she has made it all happen.

In an interview with Hermsillo in *Cineaction* by Florence Jacobowitz, Richard Lippe, and Robin Wood, which took place after the screening in Toronto of the third film in the *tareas* series, Lippe comments:

You are interested in gay thematics but your films aren’t restricted to gay themes. Do you ever find yourself thinking “I should do a gay film” just because you’re gay? How do you feel about that or how do you judge your films and your work in relation to your identity as a person? Do you feel a commitment to do a certain amount of work that is gay orientated?²⁰

Hermsillo responds:

I never plan my films in that way. It’s only most of the time the necessity of telling a story.²¹

The need to tell a story is inclusive, and does not necessitate the choice of gay material or the avoidance of it. Hermsillo is acutely conscious, though, of the fact that there are limits to what he can do. In the same interview he explains that in the third work in the *tareas* series he showed mother-son incest, but that the producers would not entertain the idea of a father-son incest plot. Perhaps the mother figure in *Doña Herlinda* is the inscription

in Hermsillo’s films of censorship and self-censorship. Hermsillo himself has commented on the negative aspects of Doña Herlinda in the interview quoted above,²² but this only serves to open questions posed but not resolved in the film (and elsewhere in his cinema) on the extent to which he is parodying or critiquing Mexican family structures, and on just how radically he is challenging those structures as they impinge on the expression of sexual desire.

In a country where the Monument to the Mexican Mother sits a short block from the downtown intersection of Reforma and Insurgentes in the capital, it is not too far-fetched to hear an echo of the name of the famous Frida Kahlo painting *Madre México y yo* (Mother Mexico and I) in the title of this film. In any case, in the course of the film Doña Herlinda is identified so thoroughly with Mexico—with its cuisine, its art, its sexual mores, its dreams of order and progress—that Olga’s comment on the “dictablanda” (soft dictatorship) of Doña Herlinda serves to identify her with the national party, the PRI. Like the party, she holds everything together in her anaconda-like deadly grasp. The pop political science terms used by Olga, “dictadura” for her parents’ regime and “dictablanda” for Doña Herlinda’s, reinforce the identification of Doña Herlinda with the PRI, with its democratic trappings and consensual framework but ultimately dictatorial powers.

Ramírez Berg has called *Doña Herlinda y su hijo* a “Utopia of tolerance.”²³ Perhaps, if we remember that most utopias, starting with Thomas More’s, have a strong authoritarian streak. Hermsillo himself, in the interview already cited, expresses considerable reservations about the “dictablanda” of Doña Herlinda:

Well, I don’t think that Doña Herlinda is a very positive character. She’s very sinister, too, because otherwise she wouldn’t have asked her son to marry that woman. She helps her son to be happy as a gay man. She’s very sinister. She’s controlling things the way she wants but she’s not giving them freedom.²⁴

A bit later in the interview he adds: “She’s a nice character but some things she does are not fine, but it’s beautiful to have those kinds of contradictions in the character.”²⁵ Contradictions: the very word used by Olga to define her objects of desire, and apparently a touchstone of Hermsillo’s esthetics.

In his essay on Hermsillo in the catalog published by the Cineteca Nacional, Francisco Sánchez notes that even in his first films in the 1960s and 1970s Hermsillo was interested in dissonant sexualities and in “freaks,” and that the homoerotic elements only gradually became central to his filmography. Indeed, after *Doña Herlinda* Hermsillo has not continued making what one might call “gay” films, though *Clandestino destino* has one gay male character (out of four) and plays with the possible bisexual

nature of the other three characters. In any case, both before and after *Doña Herlinda* Hermosillo has homosexuality present as only one element of a sexual spectrum, and, having said that, the anomalous nature of *Doña Herlinda* itself in the international context of gay filmmaking become more clear, in that in his "gayest" film Hermosillo insistently inscribes homosexuality in the context of the Mexican family structure and seemingly takes for granted the natural bisexuality of one of its main characters.²⁶ *Doña Herlinda* is not a "coming out" film but a "bringing back in" film, in which the homosexual side of one of the central characters is accommodated within the family structure.

• NOTES

I am grateful to Oscar Chong and Jorge Ruffinelli for help in gathering material on Hermosillo, including videotapes of many of his films, and to José Quiroga and Donna Guy for their readings of several versions of this paper.

1. The 1984 film is available from Macondo Video.
2. For a good account of the emergence of gay liberation movements in Mexico, see Ian Lumsden, *Homosexualidad, sociedad y estado en México*, trans. Luis Zapata (Mexico City: Solediciones; Toronto: Canadian Gay Archives, 1991), 63–78, which includes a brief discussion of the work of Luis Zapata and of Hermosillo as emblematic of the period. On the activities of GHOL in Gualajara (where Hermosillo has been based since the late 1970s), see Joseph Carrier, *De los otros: Intimacy and Homosexuality among Mexican Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 180–84.
3. Francisco Sánchez, *Hermosillo: Pasión por la libertad* (Mexico City: Cineteca Nacional, 1989), 14.
4. *Ibid.*, 14.
5. On the bisexual plot in *Making Love*, see Marjorie Garber, *Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life* (New York: Scribner's, 1995), 393–94.
6. In a story in the same volume as the narrative version of "Doña Herlinda y su hijo," Jorge López Páez writes that his character Emmanuel "resulta una combinación perfecta de Pedro Armendáriz, Jorge Negrete y Pedro Infante y ciertos detalles de Carlos López Moctezuma" (was a perfect combination of Pedro Armendáriz, Jorge Negrete, and Pedro Infante, with certain details of Carlos López Moctezuma): *Doña Herlinda y su hijo y otros hijos* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993), 8.
7. John King refers to the "ebullient machismo of Jorge Negrete"—see *Magical Reels: A History of Cinema in Latin America* (London: Verso, 1990), 50—and Charles Ramírez Berg notes "Jorge Negrete's ready smile and unselfconscious demeanor singing songs celebrating machismo" in his *Cinema of Solitude: A Critical Study of Mexican Film, 1967–1983* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 5.
8. Tomás Almaguer, "Chicano Men: A Cartography of Homosexual Identity and Behavior," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle

Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 255–73.

9. See Carrier, *De los otros*, 193–95.
10. It is hard to say anything very definite about Ramón's class, because when his parents come to visit from the North, it is apparent that they are cultured and bourgeois, though not in the same ostentatious (and urban) way as Doña Herlinda and Rodolfo.
11. See Almaguer, "Chicano Men," 259.
12. *Ibid.*, 261.
13. Ramírez Berg, *Cinema of Solitude*, 132.
14. Manuel Acuña, *Obras: Poesías, teatro, artículos y cartas*, ed. and intro. José Luis Martínez (Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 1949), 191–92.
15. José Quiroga, "(Queer) Boleros of a Tropical Night," *Travesía: Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 3.1–2 (1994): 199–213.
16. In the López Páez story "Doña Herlinda y su hijo," Ramón is the narrator, commenting frequently on the perfect communication that existed between Doña Herlinda and Rodolfo, who seem almost telepathic in their messages in unison.
17. Stephen O. Murray, "Family, Social Insecurity, and the Underdevelopment of Gay Institutions in Latin America," in *Latin American Male Homosexualities*, ed. Stephen O. Murray (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 41.
18. Carrier, *De los otros*, 14. He reiterates the point on 61.
19. I am thinking of course of the fine book by Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).
20. Florence Jacobowitz, Richard Lippe, and Robin Wood, "An Interview with Jaime Humberto Hermsillo: The Necessity of Telling a Story," *Cineaction* 31 (1993): 43. In the same issue, see Robin Wood, "Homework Times Three," *Cineaction* 31 (1993): 28–32.
21. Jacobowitz, Lippe, and Wood, "An Interview with Jaime Humberto Hermsillo," 43.
22. *Ibid.*, 42.
23. For a virulent attack on *Doña Herlinda* and on Hermsillo's work in general, see Jorge Ayala Blanco, *La condición del cine mexicano* (Mexico City: Editorial Posada, 1986), 356–75. Ayala Blanco observes: "Cruel paradoja: Hermsillo era cada día más festejado y cada día filmaba peor" (A cruel paradox: every day Hermsillo became more famous and yet every day made worse films) (366). His observations on the amateur acting, poor sound, and cinematography are quite telling, in my opinion.
24. Jacobowitz, Lippe, and Wood, "An Interview with Jaime Humberto Hermsillo," 42.
25. *Ibid.*
26. However unlikely the living arrangement in the film, the notion of a more fluid bisexuality in Mexico than in the United States is borne out in the literature, as for instance in Joseph Carrier's "Mexican Male Bisexuality," in *Bisexualities: Theory and Research*, ed. Fred Klein and Timothy J. Wolf (New York: Haworth Press, 1985), 75–85, esp. 83–84.