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PLATA QUEMADA

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There is a moment, about a half-hour into Marcelo Piñeyro's *Plata quemada* (2000), of really quite pure tragic dimensions. I use the word "tragic" advisedly, not in its overused sense of "pathetic" or "unfortunate," nor to capture the inevitable violence and death that stalks all human existence. Rather, I use it in the sense of classical Greek drama to capture that instance in which the individual defies, if not the unforgiving gods, the inflexible rules that govern the harsh realities of social life. If surviving means learning those rules and abiding by them, the essence of foolhardiness, leading implacably to untoward consequences, is to believe that one can chose not, or simply fail, to abide by those rules out of carelessness, arrogance, or misplaced (i.e., ineffective) rebelliousness. The truly tragic, in its classical formulation, emerges when the individual who is otherwise careful about adhering to the rules of social existence - perhaps less out of nobility of purpose and respect for established institutions and more out of a desire to survive through minimizing conflictual errors of behavior suddenly, in conformance with some other standard of behavior or belief, deviates, often with manifest abruptness, from the dominate code of conduct. In reality in daily life, the individual deviates from or fails to comply adequately with the social code on many occasions, with more or less unpleasant consequences. But in the tragic formulation, it is a particularly notable, literally outstanding deviation, that unleashes the furious chain of events leading to the violent denouement associated with the dramatic depiction of the tragic dimensions of human existence.

In the foregoing, I have specifically inflected my characterization of the tragic to capture its machinations as they play out in Piñeyro's film because, although the tragic in any of its many specific focuses may drive a wide array of cultural productions, it is particularly prominent in this film as central to every event that takes place from its sudden incursion in the action forward to the film's violent conclusion. Moreover, because the event of tragic proportions in question is specifically tied to a narrative of homoerotic desire that intersects the main narrative of the film - the fictional version of an actual event, a bank robbery in the Argentine provincial town in late September, 1965 - the question of how, precisely, a formulation of that desire and the dynamics of homophobia enter into the film is of enormous interest and importance for Piñeyro's interpretation of the real-life events on which his film is based.

The tragic event in question occurs when what is planned to be a fairly simple heist, in a quiet provincial town, of an armored van carrying payroll money from a bank (in 1965, payrolls in Argentina were still being met by cash disbursements), falls apart in a blaze of fire delivered by the van's armed guards. One of the basic rules of such criminal operations is that you do not interrupt flight in order to tend to or rescue the wounded. If necessary, you deliver to them a coup-de-grace (to prevent information being extracted from them by the police), but they must be left behind because of the precious few minutes that make the difference between making a clean escape from the crime scene and being caught by the police. Yet, when El Nene's partner Angel is shot in the shoulder by a bank guard, El Nene insists on stopping the getaway car to rescue Angel from the pavement and pull him into the car before departing the scene. The result is that, because of El Nene's refusal to abandon Angel or to kill him before the police arrive, the band of robbers is now saddled with a seriously wounded man, a burden that will necessitate revising their escape plans and eventually enable the police to corner them in a take-no-hostages shootout in the apartment where they eventually end up to await the healing of Angel's wound.

El Nene's insistence on rescuing Angel is not a sudden manifestation of a putative honor among thieves or a perception that Angel is so effective a crime operative that he should not be sacrificed in accordance with the usual rules for effecting a getaway. Rather, it is because El Nene and Angel are lovers. The relationship between El Nene and Angel exists in what can fairly be called a series of interlocking, unalleviated homophobic instances that attest to the overarching homophobia of Argentine society. It is a homophobia of long standing that has to do with many of the founding circumstances and principles of Argentine society (DOC), Argentina's own version of the project of modernity (which, as part of a medicalized model of society, involved an idealization of heterosexual subjects that excluded both what have been highly ideologically charged definitions of "sick" and nonreproductive homosexuals [DOC]), layers of added characterization of sexual deviation that came with the Peronista governments (especially during Perón's second administration and the increased vigilance of various categories of actual and perceived social dissidence: after the death of Evita, who was in many ways a paradigmatic fag hag [DOC], there was no sympathy for queers, no matter how problematical they were as a consequence of her influential voice, in Perón's government), and subsequent highly heterosexist military dictatorships. The period of the film, 1965, is one of a very precarious return to constitutional democracy, following the overthrow of Perón's de facto dictatorship in 1955 and on the eve of the military takeover of June, 1966, which inaugurates a period of specific persecutions of homosexuals, which is, nevertheless, I would want to underscore, of a whole with a compact history of homophobia in Argentina.

During the tentative return to democratic institutions between 1955 and 1965, there are some tentative manifestations of homosexuality (I continue to use this standard, if discredited term, for reasons that will become clear below), such as one thread in Julio Cortázar's 1960 novel *Los premios*, published in Buenos Aires by Editorial Sudamericana, or XXX. But, of course, I am speaking here of a cultural production that begins to manifest a long-standing and heretofore mostly deeply closeted homosexual life in Buenos Aires; the images of this homosexual life, nevertheless, have tended almost exclusively to be those of the transvestite, effeminate *ambiente* as described by Juan José Sebreli in his work and of the particular type of *vida homosexual* whose supposed passing he laments in the face of gay liberation and queer politics, in whatever version they have been reaching Argentina.

Precisely what is at issue in Piñeyro's film - what makes it of interest to contemporary queer politics and what sets it aside, as an interpretation of homoerotic desire that is problematically continuous with what was accounted to be the "homosexual life" of the period in which the events it describes take place - is the unalloyed macho masculinity that sustains the images of homoeroticism in the film and that characterize the subjective identities of both El Nene and Angel. It is this quality of the film that both constitutes the basis in which it can vie for attention as an example of contemporary queer filmmaking, especially for a country that, except for examples that can be taken as accidentally or circumstantially of queer interest, that is, that can be subjected to a queer reading in spite of their ostensible heterosexist ideology has very little to offer in the way of a specifically marked queer production (see my analyses elsewhere of the two important gay or queer films made in Argentine immediately after the transition to constitutional democracy in the in-1980s, XXXX).

Several of the journalistic sources on Piñeyro's film revealing quote him to the effect that "Si [El Nene y Angel] te oyen decirles gays, estos personajes te trompean." Leaving aside the threat of macho homophobic violence and why for Piñeyro or his characters it might be an appropriate response under the conditions postulated, the affirmation implies a disjunctive scope for the terms "gays" and "fully masculine men" that El Nene and Angel apparently conceive themselves to embody, and which the semiotic conventions of the film do, in fact, serve to underscore. What is notable about this comment is the line it draws in the sand between being gay and being something not to be confused with gay. Traditionally in Argentine society *homosexual*[1] is a (relatively) politer or, at least, putatively scientifically neutral term for *maricón* (faggot), in the sense of a social-semiotic complex that brings together propositions of effeminacy, cross-dressing, the desire to be a woman, the proposition of a woman trapped in a man's body, the primacy of presumedly passive anal sex[2], the goal of a male-to-female sex change operation, and male prostitution in public places in competition (and accompanied by a goal of being confused) with women.

Whether or not men who self-identify with homoerotic desire can or do accept any of these propositions is open to question, both the professional literature (medical, juridical, and a marked proportion of cultural production, most internationally recognized for Argentine literature in Manuel Puig's writing, especially *El beso de la mujer araña* [1976]) and what can be called street-level general knowledge subscribe to them and, indeed, generally hold that these propositions function as a vastly synergetic dynamic to characterize a specific and, quite often, immediately recognizable social type (for an interesting analysis of the interplay between these two broad categories of sexual knowledge, see XXX).

By the same token, *gay* in Argentina, and especially in metropolitan Buenos Aires, also has its own specific range of meaning in the social semiotics of sexuality. In many cases *gay* involves, as it does in the United States, an alternative designation to *homosexual*, with the features associated with the latter simply being "translated" wholesale to what is a newer, trendier, more modern (or postmodern) term, one that signals post-dictatorship (post-authoritarian?) Argentina's intention to participate in an international (particularly U.S.-centered) consciousness of individual rights. Nevertheless, *gay*, beyond simply transferring to its lexical domain what previously had been covered by the term *homosexual*, embraces, as befits its American-European origin, a sense of movement politics,

of specific identities, quite commonly the idea of, beyond the conventional medico-juridical proposition that *maricones* are women trapped in men's bodies, a proposition that maintains the heterosexist binary of categorical feminine and categorical masculine, of a sexuality that is neither specifically masculine or specifically feminine.

This is more the excluded and, therefore, unanalyzed middle than it is the alternative medico-juridical proposition of a putative third-sex (which itself is heterosexist, since the latter term applies to men, but not usually to women, whose sexuality other than in conformance with heterosexism simply gets elided). This is so because it implies a certain measure of sexuality under construction, of an agenda open to experimentation and the critical questioning of the multiple levels of heterosexist formulations about both the standard binary roles and those pertaining to the "other," "the dissident," "the alternative." In this sense, *gay* shades off into *queer*, a term not yet as naturalized in Spanish has *gay* has become (it is sensed, more for reasons of orthography than phonology, as still being a very much foreign word); where *queer* is not used, *gay* will be used to cover its semantic territory, either with an understanding that there is *gay* and, then, there is *gay*, or with the inevitable fusion of what the term *queer* would like to hold on to as its difference from *gay* (there are other, more naturalizable or naturalized, terms in Spanish that have been proposed to be useful for expressing the singular meanings of *queer*).

Evidently, none of this - neither *gay* (as Piñeyro clearly indicates) nor *queer* - has anything to do with El Nene or Angel. Of course *gay*/*queer* could only be pertinent to them as seen as characters of the film *Plata quemada*; that is, as read from the perspective of social priorities and identities as captured, explicitly or by interpretive attribution, in a cultural product generated in the late 1990s: just as María Luisa Bemberg queers the subjectivity of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in her film *Yo la peor de todas*, made in 1990 on the Mexican nun of the early seventeenth century, a period in which neither current sexual terminology nor current sociosexual semiotics existed, it would be difficult, really, quite inappropriate, even in a film made in relation to Argentina in the mid-1960s to speak of characters aligning themselves with late twentieth-century ideological parameters. I think it would be appropriate to assert that Piñeyro's film becomes queer, *malgré lui*, because of the way in which it interprets El Nene and Angel and their relationship to their comrades, the crime they have committed, and the police who eventually massacre them (more on this below), but this does not mean that Piñeyro would, or even could, view them as gay men or as queer in the way in which they sense their sexuality.

What then does that leave us with as a way to describe the sexuality that drives the relationship between El Nene and Angel? Let us begin with the proposition that they are two men who fuck each other. To be sure, we have to take the voice-over narrator's word for this, since we never actually see them engaged in sexual intercourse: we only see them in various states of undress, originally cruising each other in the bathrooms of Constitución (the large train station on the south side of Buenos Aires that has long been

notorious for its lower-class - or middle-class-meets-lower-class tea-room sex), or sharing a bed in less than properly manly proximity. The narrator makes the point that Angel has problems about engaging in sex, but for reasons that have nothing to do with the repudiation of same-sex acts: Angel subscribes to the old canard that sex drains away virile energy; Angel also attends to dark inner realms that tend to incapacitate him for open human commerce; after Angel is wounded and the men have to hole up rather than making a clean escape out of the country as they had originally planned, both become increasingly alienated from each other until the final holocaust[3].

Although their individual reasons for avoiding following through on the same-sex desire that originally brought them together in the first place (El Nene tosses out that he learned to be a *puto* [faggot] while in jail, although it is not clear how either he or Piñeyro understands one being "made" gay/queer; no similar point is ever made of the development of Angel's sexuality) mean that the film has a convenient reason for never having to show, never having to face up to showing and to resolve the staging issues related to having to show - them engaged in anything like one would understand as "real" sex, it is clear that the freeze in their sexual activities has nothing to do with any repudiation of or lingering heterosexist/homophobic concern over same-sex acts. And, just as it allows Piñeyro to avoid having to stage same-sex activity for a still squeamish Argentine/Latin American audience (a matter that Mexico's Jaime Humberto Hermosillo addressed quite openly, and delightfully outrageously, as early as 1985 in *Doña Herlinda y su hijo*), it also allows him to show that the bond between the two men transcends sexuality, to be inspired more by a deep personal commitment (=love?) between the two of them, which is what leads El Nene to insist on rescuing the injured Angel in the first place, thereby putting in motion the tragic denouement of the film's story. One could argue that this is simply historical fact, although Piñeyro has made it clear in other regards that he is not adhering to simply historical fact (DOC), and it is important to note that, at least to judge by the evidence of the cultural production available, no Argentine director would find much interest in telling the story of a heterosexual couple that abandoned physical love in order to nurture the supposedly higher spiritual bond between them. I will have more to say below about the seeming disingenuous way in which Piñeyro plays rather forthrightly the card of homoerotic desire between men, while at the same time in the final analysis engaging in the heterosexist suppression captured by the phrase "De eso no se habla."

The most important point to be made about the relationship between El Nene and Angel then becomes the fact that they do not see themselves as any less men, as any less masculine, as any less securely within the orbit of heterosexist privilege because of the circuit of desire that exists between them and the fact that they both have a past of sexual activity with other men. The film, certainly, could have made an issue out of "homosexuality" as a marked space of criminality, not because the guardians of heterosexist society see homosexuality as criminal (hence the presence of the medicalization of so-called deviant sexuality in the project of modernity to which Argentina subscribes beginning in the late nineteenth century), but because, in the tradition mined by Jean Genet, homosexuality and antisocial criminality have in common the radical otherness of

the individual who chooses to subvert conventional morality on all fronts possible. Piñeyro does not opt for the link between homosexuality and crime as entwined acts of social defiance. In fact, I know of no Latin American film that has pursued the Genetian understanding of this link, although there are certainly many examples of "homosexuality in prison" films, and Piñeyro could well have begun with El Nene's observation that he "became" a *puto* in prison.

Thus, what Piñeyro does opt for is the depiction of two men who have sex together and who are, in terms of dominant social models, a couple. True, they are identified as Los Mellizos, the twins, which seems to be both a euphemism to avoid calling them a couple (after all, both know how to defend themselves, know how to *trompear*, so some deference is in order here), as well as also a bit of irony: they are twins in the sense that they enjoy an exclusive relationship with each other of the sort twins often do, including having sex with each other. Yet, there is another dimension to this domination, and that is the way in which the term Los Mellizos, precisely because it avoids evoking a violent reaction from El Nene and Angel, refers to the way in which they can only in some sort of problematical way be characterized as *maricones*, since they hardly fulfill the profile of what in Argentina is typically associated with being a *maricón*. Of course, *maricón* is not exclusively used to designate the passive partner in a homoerotic dyad, nor the medicojuridical definition of couples who are not surrogate images of man and wife, at least in appearance. But the fact that there is no indication of the inquisition not the resolution in Piñeyro's film of what is at the top of the list of heterosexist questions regarding same-sex couples - who is the Mama and who is the Papa, who is passive and who is active, should signal that this all-male team must be viewed as outside the scope of the usual designation of homosexual relations.

This does not mean that the language of homophobia disappears from the film, that no note is taken of how, despite the fact that there is no evident physical sex going on and there is no manifestation of a binary masculine vs. feminine role assumption involved, these men are different. Both Fontana, the mastermind of the crime, and El Cuervo, the getaway driver, both make comments that underscore for them the deviant relationship between El Nene and Angel. El Cuervo flaunts his own heterosexist masculinity by having sex with his female lover in a room with the door open; they end up performing under El Nene's gaze, with the camera focusing on El Nene's contemplation of El Cuervo's buttocks during the sex act. At the same time, there is the insinuation that Vivi herself is involved in her own game with El Nene, as though saying, "Look, I'm the real woman El Cuervo can have; he doesn't need to have sex with *putos* like you", a proposition that ignores the reasons why putatively straight men with ample access to women do, after all, have sex with other men, both those they consider effeminate and those they consider equally straight (this is also a theme that Genet, among others, explores, for example in his novel *Querelle de Brest* [1947]). Althouh he has his back to El Nene, Vivi tells El Cuerve that they are being watch by El Nene. Although he at first reacts with anger at being spied upon by "ese puto," El Cuervo admits that, after all, he does have a great ass. This suggests that El Cuervo is not altogether unfomfortable, after all, in having sex *for* El Nene than while having sex *with* his female lover that is, his sexual exhibitionism could well be part of an erotic transaction with El Nene, such that his female lover would then be used as a pawn in the game El Cuervo is playing for El Nene's gaze. After his comment of self-adulation, El Nene does, in fact, initiate sex again with Vivi, although it is not clear to the spectator if El Nene (who at one point closes the door after Vivi has signalled to him that she knows he is there) is still watching. Whereas Fontana is openly

disdainful of the sexuality of El Nene and Angel, El Cuervo appears quite intrigued by it, and on several occasions he makes remarks or makes overtures of homophobic violence more to open display of the matter rather than to repudiate it. But this remains a barely explored motif in the film.

To summarize, then, El Nene and Angel are lovers in multiple ways, and their relationship does provoke various degrees of note and repudiation in the universe of the film. But yet they are homosexuals, *putos* (which is, indeed, one of the terms that serves at present to cover the meaning of English "queer" when it is not viewed as simply a synonym of "gay") in a very special ways. Piñeyro reinforces this special status, first of all, by making use of actors, the Argentine Leonard Sbaraglia and the Spaniard Eduardo Noriega, who comply with stereotypic images of the hypermasculine. To be sure, since the emergence of the gay clone in the 1970s (see, especially, the Chicano writer John Rechy's *The Sexual Outlaw* [1987; rev. 1985]), the hypermasculine image is part of the gay repertory of sexual icons, especially as one way of refuting (problematically) the street-wise association of male homosexuality with the effeminate man. Yet what needs to be stressed is that the hypermasculine clone is a gay icon, not a paradigm by which heterosexism recognizes the gay/queer male: indeed, it is not always clear to the heterosexist paradigm how the apparently hypermasculine male (i.e., the apparently straight male, who defies the semiotics by which heterosexism claims *always* to be able to spot the homosexual) can partake of same-sex desire and acts. This was the base of the confused outcry over Christopher Reeve exchange of kisses with Michael Cane in Sindey Lumet's 1982 *Deathtrap*: "Oh, no, not Superman" (evoking the conventional, hypermasculine role of Superman that Reeve had recently played), and the scandal of Hermosillo's *Doña Herlinda y su hijo* is not the homoerotic relationship of a married man with another man, but the fact that he is being penetrated in their private space by the latter precisely at the same time his wife begins to go into labor with the birth of their first child in the private space she shares with her bisexual husband: if he has always been the active partner, he is now willing to play the passive role, totally confounding the heterosexist binary (see my essay on the film, ZZZ). By the same token, neither of Hermosillo's characters is stereotypically effeminate, and, if not supermasculine, both comply with adequate masculinist norms. To be sure, this raises ideological questions regarding the privileging of the "adquately masculine" and the implied disparaging of the effeminate, and it underscores the limitations of commercial filmmaking (even with sophisticated artistic and social aspirations) of addressing street wisdom about homosexuality: still lacking are films in which there is an Angel/El Nene relationship between two men inscribed as effeminate, as well as one in which the effeminate man plays the active role to the hypermasculine but passive partner (i.e., an inversion of the classic "homosexual" paradigm of Babenco's 1976 *El beso de la mujer araña*).

However, the key special consideration, so to speak, for at least El Nene's status as a self-identified *puto* is the heterosexual relationship he enters into with the whore Giselle during the thieves refuge across the river from Buenos Aires in Montevideo. Whether Giselle, as an experienced whore, can "read" El Nene's sexual history or whether she even cares about it, her version of the whore with a heart of gold welcomes El Nene into her life and (in her own version of a fatal mistake) believes him when he says that he loves her and will take her away with him. This relationship can be read on two levels, neither of which is mutually exclusive of the other. In one reading, El Nene, who, as previously noted, "became a *puto*" in prison, and who is clearly frustrated in his relationship with Angel, who retreats farther and farther each day into the black hole of his demons, has not opted to "become" straight. Needless to say, from a queer perspective, if becoming a *puto* is a specious proposition, becoming straight is even more so, and one wonders to what extent in the universe of Piñeyro's sexual ideology he could pursue very far the way in which the disjunctive relationship between *puto* and straight comes under erasure in the face of the possibility of a polymorphous sexuality in which the heterosexist binary is viewed as or is rendered an inoperant fiction, such that heterosexual and homosexual are an invalidated disjunction. This hardly seems likely, as the film turns quite assertively heterosexist in two instances, the first of which has elements of violent homophobic.

The first instance involves intertwined images of an event involving Angel and another involving El Nene: Angel, drunk, wanders into a Church and ends up empty his pockets at the foot of the figure of Chist crucified; meanwhile, El Nene, as the camera cross-cuts between him and Angel, apparently to perform oral sex on a conventionally effeminate man who comes on to him in a public bathroom. If El Nene has any residual self-identification as a *puto*, it emerges in the contradictions of this scene. El Nene, while carefully articulating a highly representative inventory of the many homophobic terms in Spanish/Argentine that are synonymous with *puto*, frightens the other man by pointing his gun at this head. The man begins to sob, certainly fearing impending incident of gay-bashing murder. But it is as though El Nene's sexual arousal depended on the other man's acute fear and humiliation, because we then see him proceed to kneel before the other man and reach for his pants; the jumps to El Nene washing his mouth with drink, suggesting it is he who has performed oral sex on the other man. Thus, there is a threatening intersection of homophobic violence and the preamble of murder, followed by an act of passive sex on El Nene's part. This sequence seems less an assertion of El Nene's sexual confusion or even of internalized homophobia, but rather a form of sexual drama that represents his anger over Angel's unavailability as a sexual partner, something that is confirmed by the cross-cut sequence of Angel seeking some sort of expiation of his demons by emptying his pockets at the feet of Jesus.

The second instance involves the simple fact that the only physical sex that takes place during the film satisfies amply the conventions of heterosexist coupling, with all of the full frontal nudity allowed in post-dictatorship Argentina: the film received the most restrictive rating, but not for either the display of El Nene's and Giselle's sexual acts, nor those of El Cuervo and his lover, but for the intimation, limited to some mouth-to-mouth kissing, of sexual acts between El Nene and Angel. In this way, the only time we really see El Nene naked and the only time in which we see his genitals is when he is making love to Giselle, but never with Angel; El Nene seems to have no problem functioning as an active male, but, as I have asserted, less because Piñeyro understands that there is no necessary disjunction (although one is often created, as much by gay men as by the heterosexist paradigm) between being sexually active with either another man or with a woman, but because El Nene has, somehow, reverted to heterosexual preferences.

Yet, there is another way of interpreting El Nene's relationship with Giselle: El Nene's need to find a new refuge for him and Angel.

This possibility unquestionably involves a profound act of cynicism on El Nene's part: he seduces Giselle in order to gain access to her apartment, where he intends to transfer Angel and the money from the robbery. The scene with other man signals to the spectator that Giselle is only a convenient vehicle toward this end, and not really a "return" by El Nene to heterosexuality. Rather than involve Giselle in this scheme, he in effect expels her from her own apartment; in her anger over his rejection of her, she informs the police of his whereabouts. In this sense, El Nene's entire interlude with Giselle has been a put on. It has been a put on at Giselle's expense because of his need to find a new refuge since the house (it appears to be a duplex) he and Angel share with Fontana and El Cuervo has become compromised: it is supposed to be empty, but their comings and goings and the noise they make while in the house have attracted attention: Montevideo has never had the same degree of anonymity afforded by Buenos Aires, and the overt behavior of the three men, whom Fontana can barely control, coupled with El Nene's cabin fever, which leads him to the amusement park where he meets Giselle, is virtually suiidal.

So, in the end El Nene's interlude with Giselle has not really been a "return" to heterosexuality, no matter how well he functions with Giselle, enough so to deceive her into believing he is in love with her, which is based on an efficient heterosexual eroticism that allows the director the opportunity to turn his film into a showcase for the degree of male/female skin that has become almost requisite for credible late twentieth-century filmmaking. One would have no reservation whatever about this unabashed display of unstinting female and male nudity if it were not for the fact that the major proposition of the film, the wholly determining quality of El Nene's and Angel's tragic homoerotic relationship, has hardly anything more visually provocative than the two thieves kissing each other through face-covering bandannas. There is a structural imbalance here that is almost laughable; it becomes frankly ludicrous in the denouement of the film.

Which leads us to the need now to speak of the title of the film. *Plata quemada*, as it is based on Ricardo Piglia's dirty-realism novel, which in turn is based on barely remembered newspaper and other archival accounts of the period (an underlying motif of both the novel and the film is the way in which the full details of this historic event have been covered up for almost forty years), is the story not so much about a bank heist as it is about a massive police operation that resulted in the massacre of the protagonists of that heist. Although some viewers might wish that Piñeyro concluded his film with a bit less of the texture of a Hollywood shoot-out, the simple historical fact is that the police operation, which combined both Uruguayan and Argentine forces, was nothing short of a bloodbath.

Why this is so is the consequence of a simply expressed issue of police procedure: the police are neither interested in capturing the criminals as such, nor in recovering the stolen money for its rightful owners as they are in obtaining the money (six million pesos = approximately $25,000-$30,000 in the prevailing exchange rate in 1965) for themselves. Now, as stolen money goes, this is not a large amount: one will recall that the armored van was on its way from the bank to the municipal offices of a provincial town with a payroll to be paid in cash, and this would never have been an impressive amount of money. Yet, as much as this was a small-beans operation, several hundred thousand dollars from what was to have been a simple textbook assault make up a not insubstantial amount of money. This is an amount of money the police can easily cover up . . . after liquidating the thieves.

There are, however, two major details that defy what for the police will be their own simple textbook operation: the fact that El Nene and Angel are well aware that no matter what, the police have every intention of liquidating them and thus it is El Nene's intention that they die as much as possible in each other's arms; and it is also El Nene's intention that the police recover not a single banknote of their loot. Thus, as the police close in and the klieg lights are trained on Giselle's apartment and bull horns scream at them, as the bullets fly, in almost a drunken stupor, the two men incinerate all of the bills before the police finally burst into the apartment; El Nene and Angel do die in each other's arms, but surrounded by the mounds of ashes of the "burnt money."

Now, one can indulge here in a neo-Freudianesque - or perhaps Marcusian - disquisition on the antithesis between death-dealing capitalism and liberationary Eros: it is money, in the form of the bank heist, that spoils the two men's personal relationship. It appears that sex was a problem for them as a consequence of Angel's demons, as mentioned above, before the heist, but it is the tension of Angel's wound and their being holed up that almost drives them definitively apart. Yet by contrast, it is the decision to face down the police ambush and to destroy the real object of that ambush that brings them together again (Angel is gleeful for the first time virtually since the beginning of the film) that brings them back into close physical proximity. There is no escape for them, not so much because they are *putos*, although in the sort of Genetian context referred to above, this might indeed be the case, or simply because, now as notorious homosexuales, any return to prison could well mean officially sanctioned and even encouraged sexual abuse of the most violent nature. Rather, there is no escape for them, simply because one of the many variations on the Mediterranean practice of the *ley fuga* ("stop or I'll shoot": the practice of simulating the flight of prisoners in order legitimately to shoot them in the back, thus disposing of them once and for all) means that they must be liquidated in order to obscure the police intentions to confiscate the loot in the formers' possession.

As the two men prepare to resist violently police assault to the very end, while at the same time undertaking to destroy the money in their possession, they strip down, Rambo-style, for their trial by fire. It would be absurd to indulge in any fantasy about what would be appropriate attire for such a confrontation, and what might constitute too much or too little in the way of clothing: these men opt for individualized boxer shorts. Let us say that El Nene wears version A of a boxer design, while Angel wears version B. Given the relationship between the two men and the fact that they have, in a sense, come back home to each other (El Nene from Giselle's arms; Angel from the realm of his demons), one could speculate that the naked warriors/Spartacus model might be appropriate to the circumstances. But no, not even form-fitting briefs, much less bikini-cut, but rather straight-arrow manly boxers are the order of the day.

If I sound like I'm getting carried away here, it is because of the uproarious consequences of Piñeyro's evident decision to shy away from what might be a definitive confirmation of the homoerotic circuit binding the two men - i.e., that they confront their tragic doom

in the altogether. Piñeyro's decision - and how can one determine whether it is conscious or simply an unexamined reflex of the conventions of commercial filmmaking? - to strategically clothe these Adonises, whose tragic quality, enhanced by Everyman's fantasy (straight or gay) of being as hunky as these two heroes, is underscored by their stoic confrontation of the inevitable consequences of the mistake of violating the basic criminal code to dump the wounded, directs attention to the prolonged recreation of the Hollywood shoot-'em-up finale, with no possibility that the spectator might spend more time focusing on the primary masculine attributes of the two men: if you didn't pay close enough attention to El Nene's body in Giselle's arms, you will not have the chance to see much of it as he wrings his own bloody end alongside his male lover.

Where the ludicrousness of this heterosexist punch-pulling staging really emerges is not in the sort of perverse, resistant reading I am sketching. Rather it comes from a blatant technical error on the part of the support crew: in the final sequence of the film, El Nene and Angel are wearing each other's boxers. If one were yet even more perverse, it would be possible to entertain the possibility that, during some unreported lull in their death throes, the two men made love and, in their haste, happened to dress in each other's clothes (a confusion that could serve to reinforce the ambiguity over the heterosexist conundrum of who is the active partner and who is the passive one). But there is no textual evidence for this sort of explanation, and we are left with the bald probability that, in going from one day of filming to the other, the wardrobe person get each man into the others drawers.

In this way, the technical details of getting the filming right (and films are notorious for this sort of mistake, which mostly goes unnoticed in the rhythm of the film's delivery of changing) underscore what is a major dimension of Piñeyro's film: the fact that he sets out to organize his film around the tragic flaw represented by love as it intrudes in and intersects with the code of conduct of criminal activity. It is to Piñeyro's enormous credit that that love is portrayed as homoerotic, in a way that highlights what is only really alluded to in passing in Piglia's novel. And it is also to Piñeyro's enormous credit that he refuses to indulge in the tired cliches that hold that homoerotic desire is always doomed to wreck and destruction: love does lead to wreck and destruction here, but not because it turns on same-sex desire, but only because it interferes with the severe codes of criminal getaways.

But yet, Piñeyro's credit is diminished by his apparent need to reinvest, if not in the worst and most tired cliches, at least in other tired shibboleths of sexual ideology relating to becoming/being homosexual and returning to/recovering heterosexuality. Concomitantly, while the film engages in the forthright display of full-bodied physical sexuality when a heterosexual couple is involved (even when appears to involve a cynical sexual performance on El Nene's part), the only alluded-to and talked-about sexuality that binds El Nene and Angel, plus the noticeable chasteness in which, as a couple, they face, as tragic heroes, police annihilation all serves to lessen the possibility of the spectator departing the viewing of this film as an uncompromising depiction of homoerotic desire and its intersection with some really very unpleasant truths about the circumstances of life that engender its tragic sense.

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1 *When I italicize what appear to be English-language terms, I am actually signalling my use of their Spanish-language cognates, and it should be borne in mind that the semantic scope may not always be exactly co-terminus between the two languages.*

2 *I will be using "passive" and "active" here as though these were transparent and unproblematical terms: they are not, not at least as synonyms, respectively, of "penetrated" and "penetrator." However, I leave them unanalyzed here, strategically accepting their street-wisdom sense, because actual sexual acts are only passingly at issue in Piñeyro's film.*

3 *At one point the narrative voice over reports Angel's inner monologue after he has rejected El Nene's attempt to engage in sex: {Se que le hago daño, yo también tengo ganas, yo también quiero, per no puede ser. No es por las voces: ellas me dicen que [si y me dicen que], me gritan puto, marica, santo, quieren confundirme. [Lo hago] por la leche. Hay que guardarla. La leche es santa. SI nos quedamos sin semen, nos quedamos sin Dios. La leche es santa." Leche in Spanish is a colloquial term for semen.*