

## Outing Javier Fuentes-León's *Contracorriente* and the case for a New Queer Cinema in Latin America

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**Abstract:** The piece proposes a reevaluation of contemporary Queer Latin American cinema through the study of Javier Fuentes-León's *Contracorriente*. I maintain a transdisciplinary approach to the analysis by interrelating criticism on Queer Latin America with broader critical categorizations such as New Queer Cinema, to thereby properly contextualize the film within local and global paradigms. The second purpose of these pages, albeit tangential to the first, is to explore the affective and aesthetic qualities of Fuentes-León's film, as I suggest that *Contracorriente* is more problematic than a feel-good film about homosexual awareness, and is, instead, a paradoxical project that underlines the tensions of gender, spatial, aesthetic, and political difference within heteronormative systems. I examine the affect of homosexuality through the identification of an aesthetics of heteronormativity that conditions a non-Queer reading and feeling of the film. The study, furthermore, examines the use of space in the film, and interrelates it with contemporary works by Lucía Puenzo and Julia Solomonoff, as I argue that Fuentes-León outs the homosexual from traditional topologic referents.

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Javier Fuentes-León's directorial debut, *Contracorriente* (2009), has garnered both critical interest and success, winning rave reviews from respected international print and web outlets and coveted Audience Awards at Sundance, Chicago, Miami, and Cartagena. The

film recounts the archetypal love triangle of gay man (Santiago)-closeted man (Miguel)-unsuspecting wife (Mariela) in a quiet fishing village somewhere in Latin America, exploring issues such as religion, death, and homophobia, all within a magical ghost story. It comes as no surprise, then, that some reviews call *Contracorriente* “*Brokeback Mountain* meets *Ghost*” (Rose), tacking Fuentes-León’s film onto a growing corpus of mass-market homosexual-themed cinema that shares the populist project of raising awareness of homosexuality. What interests me as a critic, however, in reading and, to some extent, feeling *Contracorriente*, is its placement within a critical Latin American canon of gay cinema, which has been found lacking as a negotiating agent in global discussions of a Queer cinema. I am referring to B. Ruby Rich’s notion of a New Queer Cinema in the 1990s and the assertion of a poetics and politics of the moving image that radicalizes depictions of the Queer. Therein lies the first motive behind these pages, as I propose to contextualize *Contracorriente* within its cinematic antecedents, thereby permitting a global dialogue with Queer cinema. The second purpose of these pages, albeit tangential to the first, is to explore the affective and aesthetic qualities of Fuentes-León’s film, as I suggest that *Contracorriente* is more problematic than a feel-good film about homosexual awareness and is instead a paradoxical project that underlines the tensions of (gender, spatial, aesthetic, political) difference within heteronormative systems. In this second vein, I focus on the film’s haptic qualities and its affective potential in guiding the viewer into the intricacies of Latin American sexuality.

The film’s production and popularity comes at a time when Peruvian cinema is undergoing a modest boom in filming and global reception. While Latin American cinephiles may be familiar with the work of Francisco Lombardi and Enrique Carreras, newer auteurs such as Ricardo de Montreuil and Claudia Llosa have blazed trails on the local and global stage. This movement is thematically characteristic and fundamental in understanding recent Latin American cinema, as it illustrates the tensile globalizing forces of cultural homogeneity and heterogeneity (Appadurai 25), or in spatial terms that are correlated but not necessarily mutually exclusive, of territorialization and deterritorialization. The former dyad (homogeneity/territorialization) can be understood in Llosa’s films that are ardently localized (*Madeinusa*, *La teta asustada*), whereas the latter (heterogeneity/deterritorialization) is evident in de Montreuil’s globalized narratives that resist local identifiers (*La mujer de mi hermano*, *Máncora*). This trend is unsurprising if we consider the ontoformative relationship between cinema and the written word in Latin America, as contemporary narrative represents a similar schizophrenic identity that in some regards is a development of the Crack and McOndo movements of the 1990s.

Even within the second dyad, however, we can find details of localization, as de Montreuil’s adaptation of Jaime Bayly’s novel of the same name is subtle in locating the diegesis in Mexico City, though Bayly is careful to never specify the geographic referents of his narrative. *Máncora*, furthermore, never allows the viewer to forget that we are in the posh coastal region of Peru, though a casual viewer may not necessarily know this detail given the multitude of accents and national origins depicted in the film. There is a critical difference in these films in opposition to their parallel literary movement, as they emphasize the non-territorial and heterogeneous as being within the imaginary borders of Latin America and not a nameless, geographic modernity. Keeping these two movements in mind, we can easily locate Fuentes-León’s film within the second dyad of heterogeneity (in terms of language, action, culture, etc.) and deterritorialization, as the visual topographies

and topologies do not necessarily articulate the film within a Peruvian landscape, opting instead for the broader categorization of Latin American cinema. The director is quick to stress this facet of the film:

My intention was not to talk about the political context of Cabo Blanco, of a man in this particular town in Peru that deals with being gay or with a homosexual relationship. I don't even mention that it's Cabo Blanco — you see it on a few boats, some of them say Cabo Blanco, but I don't even say it's Peru. There was even a line that was taken out that talked about Lima, because I wanted it to be an archetype of a town, more than the political and social context of a specific town and country. (Fuentes-León)

The film can, therefore, be contextualized within a trajectory of Latin American cinema that breaks with national cinema models. Working on the politics of affect and emotion in contemporary Latin American cinema, Laura Podalsky affirms that “by situating themselves globally and deemphasizing national commitments, these filmmakers contribute to the characterization of contemporary Latin American cinemas as a willing participant in the depoliticized, pro-market atmosphere that emerged in the region in the late 1980s and early 1990s as neoliberal administrations took power throughout the region” (3). We can, therefore, situate *Contracorriente* not only within a genealogy of Peruvian cinema, but perhaps more appropriately in a lineage of Latin American films.

A sub-genealogy, furthermore, can be elaborated around the notion of homosexual-themed cinema in the continent. David William Foster's excellent study, *Queer Issues in Contemporary Latin American Cinema*, provides both a needed chronology of gay-themed contemporary cinema and an answer to Ramiro Cristobal's ethical interrogation of if it is “lícito hablar de cine homosexual” (7). Cristobal problematizes the notion of gay cinema when he circumscribes the difference between a homosexual and a queer cinema (13-29), posing that what we see produced in the contemporary Peninsular context is more aligned with Anglo notions of queerness, which can be understood as:

todo aquello que instaura una postura desafiante a la heteronormatividad patriarcal. Puede ceñirse, primordialmente, a la legitimación del deseo homoerótico -mujeres que desean mujeres, hombres a hombres – pero no se limita solamente a esta cuestión, sino que lo *queer* puede representar la legitimación de la promiscuidad, la prostitución en todas sus manifestaciones, el matrimonio que se niega a procrear, la pasión de la tercera edad y toda una gama de prácticas del amor entre seres humanos que no cumplen con los preceptos de la Iglesia y sus proyecciones en las leyes y los códigos del estado laico. (Foster, *Ensayos* 197)

The inference I am making here is that the bulk of homosexual-themed Latin American cinema is not really queer, but instead *maricón* cinema that does nothing to queer traditional heteronormative gender and sexual politics and subjectivities. Caution, however, must be exercised in making such broad affirmations, as a more holistic approximation to homosexual-themed cinema in Latin America can divide films into two subsets: queer-themed films that actively undertake an Anglo problematization of gender

and queerness through an inclusion of a Northern politics of identity (most notably in independent Mexican arthouse films from the 1980s, and contemporary cinema from Brazil); and *maricón* cinema that does not substantially insert itself within the global sexual politics of emancipation and destabilization, choosing instead to focus on the representation in the public sphere of homosexual characters, stereotypes, and issues. This vein of cinema often solely mocks, parodies, and delegitimizes male homosexual characters in contraposition to their heteronormative counterparts. When not the object of ridicule, gay characters are often the subjects of both violent and subtle homophobia, as the viewer is subject to identify what constitutes separating the gay subject from the broader social matrix. At no moment are we given the visual and haptic cues to identify with and, therefore, problematize the matrices of heterosexuality, or to envision any real, intimate exploration of the sexual continuum in Latin America. *Maricón* cinema solely engages the viewer in identifying and placing the gay male character in a diegetic social structure, where what is often valued and emphasized is the vantage of patriarchy. The latter can be traced from Jaime Humberto Hermosillo's *Doña Herlinda y su hijo* (1985) to Lombardi's *No se lo digas a nadie* (1998). In these films, homosexuality and homoeroticism "never exist in any other space than the dark side of compulsory heterosexuality in the bleak terrain created by hypocrisy" (Foster, *Queer* 109). These films expose and let live the homosexual subject without necessarily questioning structural and epistemological facets of heteronormativity, lending the *maricón* instead the position of object within an understanding of homophobia (as a system of repression in relation to societal uniformity). I will return to this point later when dealing with the problematic of homosexuality in *Contracorriente*, as the film does not, at first glance, queer the heteronormative familial and sexual practices of the fishing village. This divide is further noticed in critical approximations to the region's cinema: the Latin American section of Thomas Waugh's comprehensive study of global queer cinema, for example, is unsurprisingly titled "The Kiss of the Maricon," albeit without an accent (173).

This distinction between queer and *maricón* cinema is further exemplified by the exclusion of Latin American films from any critical discussion of New Queer Cinema, a descriptive label for gay-themed films that push forth aesthetics and politics of "defiance," beginning in the 1990s (Aaron 3). This subgenre focuses on minority groups within the lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender (LGBT) community, eschews positive imagery, defies the sanctity of the (homophobic) past, questions the fatality of death—particularly in relation to the AIDS disease—and defies cinematic convention in terms of form, content, and genre (Aaron 4-5). In a sense, these films normalize the queer by not explicitly devoting an entire plotline to its existence, but by instead viewing sexual otherness and marginality as axiomatic. Most importantly, queer bodies are not treated as solely (positive or negative) stereotypes, but are radicalized as non-conforming gender expressions. The absence of Latin American cinema in Michele Aaron's anthology on New Queer Cinema and its legacy in the twenty-first century is thought provoking, especially since the region has not been a stranger to homosexual-themed films. The absence is further felt in New Queer Cinema-inspired projects such as Leandro Palencia's *La pantalla visible: El cine queer en 33 películas*, where only three out of thirty-three movies are in Spanish. None of these, as expected, come from Latin America. This disconnect, on the one hand, may be explained by New Queer Cinema's lack of concern with people of color or other cultures, as they tend to be added on haphazardly as token others.<sup>[1]</sup> On the other hand, we can further the

argument that Latin American gay-themed cinema is less queer and more *maricón*, as the bulk of films do not effectively and affectively queer anything.

It is worthwhile at this juncture to return to Foster's genealogy of homosexual-themed or *maricón* cinema in Latin America, as a thematic trend can be gleaned from his critical queer reading of each film. It is important to note that the critic does not insert these themes in a global Queer movement, but rather provides a queer hermeneutic to understand *maricón* films. In establishing a corpus, Foster encounters films that superficially portray homosexual subjects and relationships without explicitly interrogating or minting them for their queer potential (25) and more complex films that problematize gender, but usually within a broader study of power systems. This latter group includes *La virgen de los sicarios* (2000, the globalized drug trade), *En el paraíso no existe el dolor* (1997, border studies), Cuban films on homosexuality during Castro's government, and *No se lo digas a nadie* (globalization and urbanity). Even Hermsillo's *Doña Herlinda* can be read through the optics of nation building and the role of popular culture in imagining the nation (Schulz-Cruz 21-8). There is a critical disconnect in talking about a queer Latin American cinema, as what is often represented, studied, and problematized is a gay cinema. Bernard Schulz-Cruz, for example, uses the word queer interchangeably with "gay, homosexual, joto, loca" (18). This is a dangerous practice, as criticism is confusing the queer (as a decentering position, practice, and epistemology) with the homosexual (which does not necessarily question heteronormative systems and structures).

Within this theorization of a distinct *maricón* cinema in juxtaposition to a global Queer movement is a succinct understanding of the role of space in Latin American culture and, by extension, film. A perusal of contemporary novels provides a strong textual basis for affirming that spatiality is intrinsic to gender subjectivities. The urban, public, and central is the site of heteronormativity, where hegemonic masculinity (Connell 81) reigns over feminine and queer positions. Recent texts such as Ana Clavel's *Cuerpo náufrago* (2005), Alberto Fuguet's *Mala onda* (1991), and Bayly's *La mujer de mi hermano* (2002) can be read in a long sequence of narratives that gender the center as urban, dating back to colonial- and independence-era literature. In fact, we can consider Luis Zapata's *El vampiro de la colonia Roma* (1978) to be most innovative not necessarily due to the writing of a queer figure, but because it queers the praxis of the masculine homosocial in the urban space. The films Foster establishes in a Latin American (*maricón*) filmic canon similarly follow a spatial mapping of the subject vis-à-vis gendered topologies, as sexuality is negotiated within the urban, and, microstructurally, within the domestic. Orlando Rojas's *Las noches de Constantinopla* (2002), for example, clearly illustrates the spatiality of the domestic in maintaining and perpetuating heteronormative systems (Lewis 90).

Returning to *Contracorriente*, I want to argue that Fuentes-León's love triangle at the idyllic shores of a fishing village breaks from the tradition of *maricón* cinema, and can instead be read as *New Maricón Cinema*, in dialogue with, yet not as a direct subset of, Rich's New Queer Cinema, as the film presents instead a paradox of competing positions and postulates on gender that problematize its inclusion within Rich's and Foster's respective genealogies. It can be considered a "New" iteration of films by Hermsillo and Lombardi as it undertakes a queering, on several levels, of the representation of homosexuality in Latin America.

In the most obvious sense, *Contracorriente* relocates the homosexual problematic to the non-urban and non-territorialized seaside space, breaking with previous films that always maintain the urban as a topologic referent. There is a spatial queering in the geographic sense of the homosexual subject away from the masculine/feminine space of the public/private extant in urban settings. He is, instead, relocated and renegotiated in a non-traditional geography that lays a foundation for more substantial cognitive and haptic approximations to the subject. By doing so, gender and sexuality are treated outside contextualized sociopolitical systems of oppression that are characteristic of Latin American gay cinema. In effect, we can argue that *Contracorriente* succeeds in outing Latin American cinema from the domestic/urban space. An earlier sample of this shift is signaled in Eduardo Nabal Aragón's study of *Y tu mamá también* (2001), as he argues that Alfonso Cuarón's film only manages to delve into the homoerotics of a very homosocial relationship through the spatial displacement away from the city and towards the rural beachside (176). A similar structure can be observed in Julian Schnabel's *Antes que anochezca* (2000, based on the novel by Reinaldo Arenas), as the film queers the macho sex symbol (Javier Bardem) in the homoerotic and liminal geography of the coast.

There is a narratological queering of the *maricón* genre, as Fuentes-León employs and, to an extent, problematizes the magical realist aesthetic that is, in itself, polemic in contemporary cultural production from the region. Unlike previous films that have tended to spoon on a healthy dose of reality to the urban chronicles of sexual exploration, *Contracorriente* engages a magical break, explaining, in part, the critical comparison to *Ghost*. The final, and perhaps most interesting, queering can be deemed affective, as the film decenters stereotypes such as the closeted male, cheated spouse, and scandalized village through a carefully framed tactile and aural experience of heterosexual norms. There is a recalibration of the stereotype, which, as understood by Rey Chow, is an "objective, normative practice that is regularly adopted for collective purposes of control and management" (54). This latter process, however, is intrinsically spatial, as Fuentes-León frames and deframes homosocial relations relative to what Waugh terms the private/public function of space (183-4), as *Contracorriente* plays with the scopophilic and the haptic in creating a more nuanced and emotionally intense relation between the viewer and the onscreen image.

The film is acutely aware of the role of space as genderized and genderizing, and pays particular attention to its role in the poetic characterization of the homosexual. The film begins with a tight close shot of Mariela's very pregnant stomach. The rhythmic rising and falling, which induces a maternal/paternal emotion in the viewer, is interrupted by a cross dangling from Miguel's neck, underlining the triangle between sexuality, organized religion, and procreation. There is, in effect, a stark visual representation of heteronormative systems and structures that Queer theory aims to dislocate. The two characters play up this representation as Miguel playfully questions the gender of the baby, leading Mariela to chastise him for possibly "confusing" the child. From the onset of the film, heteronormativity is placed in a dialect with non-conforming subject positions.

Certain succinct and repeated spaces in the film are further ascribed to being representative of heteronormativity. The bar where Miguel, Héctor, and the rest of the village's male population go to drink and play cards is a poignant example. The blonde, scantily clad pinup reminds the viewer that this is a distinctively masculine space, unwelcoming of Santiago as he invites the men to several bottles of beer to honor the

passing of Héctor's brother and Miguel's cousin, Carlos. The men initially reject the offer, but acquiesce to the gesture upon Miguel taking a swig from a bottle, foreshadowing his clandestine relationship with Santiago. Miguel and Mariela's house, furthermore, illustrates the domesticity of heteronormativity through the carefully placed marriage portrait of the two next to the door, in addition to several Catholic-themed prints. The viewer is constantly reminded of the sanctity of heterosexual marriage upon the diegetic entering of characters into the house through these visual aids, emphasizing the importance of the localized space and the scopic in characterizing the subject.

The bar, the house, and the church in the small fishing village are reference points in establishing a topography of gender in *Contracorriente*, as the first shot of the diegetic village is a long shot split between the ocean and the desert, which are two oppositional spaces constructed by their differences. If one is colorful, dynamic, and full of life, the other is somber, dreary, and dead. The gendered spaces of the village exist in between the binary geographies. It is, therefore, unsurprising that Miguel and Santiago can only express their homoerotic desire when spatially separated from the restrictive and restricted topography of heteronormativity. Their first embrace is captured in an empty and incomplete house in the desert, separated from the village by a steep hill that Miguel quietly climbs. It is poignant that the images only show him negotiating this spatial shift, as he, unlike Santiago, must function within the norms of heterosexuality demanded by the house/bar/church. By climbing the hill and coming out on the other side, Miguel effectively leaves behind his heteronormative shell and can fully express his homoerotic desire for Santiago. He goes from room to room in the empty incomplete house, perhaps a metaphor for a Latin American political project of homosexual emancipation that is structurally in place, but which requires consistent and substantial edification. Graffiti on one of the walls fuels this reading, as it states "se prohíbe hacer caca en esta casa," underlying the biopolitical sanctity of the queered domestic space. Though not adhering to the heteronormative principles of the village house, the desert/homosexual space demands its own sense of domesticity, as it is a living space for the homosexual couple.

The film, furthermore, queries other heteronormative spaces such as the fishing boat, the site of homosocial work. Its genderizing potential is established early in the film as Miguel and the other men salute the priest on the beach as they haul in a catch. The gesture of acknowledgement establishes a symbolic union between the masculine cultural space of work and the hierarchy and organization espoused by the Catholic Church, elaborated later when the fishermen partake in church activities. The second homoerotic encounter, unsurprisingly, occurs in a similarly queered boat, as Miguel and Santiago meet in the empty, land-ridden carcass of a ship. It is located away from the heteronormative space of the village and the metonymic entity of the fishing boat, akin to their first encounter in the desert house. In this scene, Miguel reveals to Santiago that Mariela will be having a boy. The film encourages a scopic viewing through the frames of the ship's scaffolding within the frames of the multi-angled medium and close shots that capture the interchange. The images invite us to look in on this private moment of homoerotic relations, as though the men have been painted as a couple within a wooden frame, not quite unlike the framed marriage portrait at the entrance of the village house. There is, furthermore, a paradox of being vis-à-vis spatiality, as the film plays with the concepts of being in/invisible and out/visible, as though homosexuality exists within closed spaces in the film. It is visual and scopophilic, as the viewer is permitted and encouraged to witness

Santiago and Miguel through the opened walls of the incomplete house and the empty frames of the fishing boat.

The juxtaposition of heteronormative and queer spaces, in addition to the paradox of being that the boat and house posit, provides the underlying substrate for the theorization of gendered spaces and spaces of acceptability within the diegesis. The film highlights the notion of a spatial contract of and for heteronormativity in Latin American film, returning to Waugh and Foster's ruminations on the role of the private and public. Miguel and Santiago's inability to express their emotions within heteronormative geographies points to the existence of a spatial contract of acceptability, where gendered bodies must act out certain gender roles within culturally specific loci of heterosexism. These loci can further be defined as semantic, physical assemblages of the lines and structures of power that keep patriarchy functioning. A brief list of such spaces may include a church, a school, a single-family home, and even the neighborhood bar. Miguel, for example, must be manly, powerful, and domineering within the household (the spatial nucleus of heteronormativity), which partially explains Mariela making him watch soccer instead of the afternoon soap opera when she first hears of his relationship with Santiago.

A further example of the contract can be evidenced in the first love scene between the two men. Panning long shots from right to left capture them making their way to a secluded beach cave that cannot be accessed during high tide. The dry desert that backgrounds Santiago's journey is contrasted with the vivacious vibrancy of Miguel's boat ride. A further contrast can be found in the framing of these shots, as while the desert is opened and uninhibited by diegetic framing devices, the ocean is at times framed and closed in by rocky outcroppings. The diegetic framing of Miguel's moving shots in contrast with the fluid ocean can be interpreted as a simple metaphor for him being closed or closeted in his sexuality, whereas the free and unrestricted angles of Santiago reflect his self-acceptance of desire. They meet in a cave, another substitute for the house that Miguel shares with Mariela, and engage in a sensual and erotic episode that is emotively jarring in its subtle compliance with the coital aesthetics of heteronormativity.

The film frames their lovemaking through a stylized sequence of close and unsteady shots that capture semantic parts of the homosexual subject without necessarily portraying the whole. Shots focus on the hands, the back, the buttocks, and the hair, so much so that the viewer at times forgets that they are watching two men engage in homoerotic sex.

The scene begins with Santiago on top of Miguel, a configuration that is quickly flipped as Miguel adopts the missionary position on top of Santiago, effectively queering any notions of Latin American homosexuality being a binary of a decidedly macho top and an effeminate, taken bottom. In fact, *Contracorriente* completely resists identifying either man as the penetrator, as Miguel and Santiago interchange subservient and 'feminine' roles throughout the film. This is perhaps most poignantly observed in a post-coital shot, where Miguel rests his head on Santiago's naked and hairy chest, adopting a traditionally female position. The composition of the two leading men adds to this observation, as neither is aesthetically feminine or sissified, evoking a further break from *maricón* cinema, which is quick to visually and epistemologically characterize the penetrated male (de la Mora 113): Santiago and Miguel are hairy, virile, and masculine for all intents and purposes, except for the fact that they are in love with a member of the same sex.

The aesthetics of the sex scene and the affective intensity it generates of calculatedly not producing discomfort in the viewer can be attributed to the camera's focusing on



Miguel's buttocks during the missionary position. Their rhythmic rising and falling, returning to Mariela's pregnant belly in the first shot of the film, can be read within the aesthetics of heteronormative sex, not unlike a latter scene where Miguel penetrates his wife. In fact, we can, for a second, completely forget that Miguel is having sex with a man, regimenting the viewer to perceive the sexual act as conforming to Joseph Kupfer's notion of sexual ethics at the cinema (249-51), a problematic position as the critic foregrounds an orthodox reading of gender relations. The men's penises, furthermore, are never captured in the same detail and setting as the buttocks, and are instead relegated to long, grainy shots that reveal their nudity without exactly portraying the (unwatchable) penis. The director addresses this disconnect by emphasizing the affective potential of the moving image in relation to its reception by Latin American audiences: "I made this film for as many people as can get to see it, but I had the Latin American audience in mind, and I wanted to highlight the romance and the love between the two men, and be a little bit careful about how much to push that envelope. I didn't want to lose [the audience], especially because [scenes with Miguel and Santiago] come early in the movie" (Fuentes-León). The coital aesthetic of heterosexuality that the film seizes to frame homosexual sex is fundamental to the notion of not making the film "unwatchable" to unconditioned Latin American viewers.[2]

What I am getting to is the critical shift towards affect that *Contracorriente* necessitates in contrast to earlier *maricón*cinema, as "the material presence of the image competes with, and often supersedes, its representational power" (Beugnet 68). The geography of the film, in combination with alternating long and close scenic shots, emphasizes the haptic in inviting the reader to touch and feel the spaces of the village, namely the desert's grainy sand in contrast to the warm, wet, and bustling ocean. Working with the axiom that the filmic image is not only visual but also tactile, Asbjørn Grønstad theorizes the existence of the "unwatchable" as "not just [...] graphic violence" but "virtually anything in the image that may insult our sensibilities, that makes us want to avert our eyes, or that forces us to reconsider our investments, be they visual/aesthetic or political/moral" (15). The unwatchable, more importantly, is "a means to an epistemological-ethical end" (15), leading us, in turn, to consider what is the ethical drive behind resemanticizing the homosexual along an aesthetics of heterosexual sex. The buttocks, that corporal and epistemological site of male homosexual desire, is recalibrated along heteronormative visuals to not be a site of penetration, but rather the corporal motor behind the penetrating phallus, allowing a sensitive audience to not feel displeasure in watching its rise and fall, later played out in the sex scene between Miguel and Mariela when the husband must prove his virility to the suspecting wife.

While *Contracorriente* avoids being unwatchable, it can, however, be approached through the notion of Grønstad's "inwatchable" cinema, as "it contains elements that actively try to withstand the endemic reduction of all experience and epistemology to the totalizing work of the visual" (85). There is, as I cite above, a narratological queering, as the filmic narrative forces the viewer to peel away the façade of the visual and to consider the textual, cultural, and literary layers behind Fuentes-León's film. That is, there is a clear and visible appropriation of the magical realist aesthetic. Inwatchable films invite the viewer to peel "away [...] the visual layer of the image to reveal the tactile substance underneath it, thus exposing itself to the haptic" (97). An inwatchable film, furthermore, "defuses the sway of the image by displacing aesthetic pleasure from the domain of the visual to that of

the tactile. Granted, the film is not an object to be touched, but that does not mean that it cannot itself enact tactility in the form of visual (and sometimes aural) gestures" (97). We can effectively "touch" the image in *Contracorriente* through the film's literary use of the magical realist aesthetic, almost as if we were reading Fuentes-León's images on a page written chronicling Macondo Latin America.

Homoerotic sex is, as a result, haptic in the film, as the scenes of coitus are displaced from the scopophilic settings of the bedroom, the cinema, or the back alley (all spaces that invite a gaze and which are prevalent in *maricón* cinema) and are, instead, re-ascribed onto the tactile spaces of the beach, the sand, and the ocean. Close and tightly composed portrait shots of Santiago and Miguel after making love invite the reader to feel the textures and sounds that exist under the visual layer. In a close shot where Santiago lays naked as a wave washes over and caresses his post-orgasmic face, the viewer is treated to the cold and smooth textures of water running over the grainy sand, evocative of the macro-geography of queerness that exists right outside the heteronormative village, that is, in the desert space or in the sea.

The magical realist aesthetic, which successfully makes the film inwatchable, is nothing new in cinema coming from or about Latin America. What is original, however, is its use to discuss and problematize queer identities, as Fuentes-León's film effectively queers the narrative mode. We can view magical realism as an "aesthetic mode" (Pérez Melgosa 106), though *Contracorriente* may better be termed a post-magical film, as it both acknowledges a cultural and historical connection to magical realism and puts forth a path to transcend it. This transcendence is made possible by decentering the aesthetic mode from traditional narratives to an uncomfortable zone that forces the viewer to reconsider preconceived judgments and perceptions. Unlike Patrick Swayze in *Ghost*, we are not only asked to reorient our epistemologies of viewing to accommodate the spectral, but are also asked to consider the homosexual experience within a patriarchal system of homophobia. The aesthetic mode, as Adrián Pérez Melgosa argues, "frequently attempt[s] to bring comfort from the cultural anxieties insistently brought about by [the] constant realization of the gap existing between languages that evolved in a different history and continent" (109). The film queers this notion of magical realism through a semantic substitution of "language," as it reframes a narrative mode often used to negotiate parallel yet exclusive cultural paradigms to analogically parallel gender expressions of difference. The director can be congratulated for this narratological innovation, as the magical in *Contracorriente* seemingly alleviates the anxiety of the other, the *maricón* who threatens heteronormativity.

Language and its enunciation, however, is intrinsic to the construct of the homosexual male, as the film captures the typical silence over the queer as something that cannot be named yet which always exists, veiled in a hypocritical secrecy. The rumors that mull around the homosexual/artist/foreigner/other emphasize Chris Straayer's notion of homosexuality often being an open secret, where "the act of coming out often exposes an elaborate structure of *unknowing*, a deliberate ignorance induced by a fear of continuity" (163). Miguel's *unknowing*, for example, is so ingrained that he cannot see the penis in an ultrasound of their baby. Borrowing from Eve Sedgwick's theorizations of the closet, Straayer furthers the notion that homosexual relations are kept secret, as "by maintaining the secret, one hopes to contain homosexuality in the bodies of others" (164). When it is enunciated, as when Héctor confronts Miguel about the nude paintings of his body found in

the now-deceased painter's home and calls him a *maricón*, violence is the only answer, as language cannot acknowledge the other, since by doing so implies contagion.

A further post-magical characteristic can be evidenced in the queering of space, or the breach of the spatial contract of heteronormativity, as like other cinematic narratives that espouse a post or anti-magical stance, *Contracorriente* "depict[s] geography as an imaginary category in order to reject any ontological link between culture and territory" (109). It is clear even within the narratological queering of the genre that spatiality is fundamental in understanding how *Contracorriente* brings something "New" to the aesthetics and politics of *maricón* cinema. The film posits a symbolic lattice that emphasizes the geographic/imaginary contract of heteronormativity, away from traditional signifiers of gender in the urban. This shift is evidenced by the death of Santiago after the two men fight about Miguel's inability to break the spatial contract and to openly affirm his relationship with the painter. Santiago dies off screen, explicated posthumously by the magical-realist spectral figure that recounts how the waves crashed his body onto the rocks before dragging it below in the undertow. The title of the film originates from the elimination of the queer male (as he aims to decenter heteronormativity, unlike Miguel), stressing the processes of his demise in the plot. He is killed by and in the symbolic spaces of queerness in the film, as the fluid and haptic ocean sacrifices his body to the arid and grainy coast, emphasizing the intrinsic connection between body and space. The shots immediately following their fight are underwater and devoid of sound, focusing on subtle yet distinctive rays of light that break the waves and invite the viewer to look downwards. A similar directionality is evoked in the next sequence as the camera focuses on sand being blown across the beach, again in a downward motion to the static camera. The quietness of the marine is contrasted with the aurally uncomfortable wind that evokes the haptic in that the viewer can not only visualize the wind and the coast, but also feel the grains of sand rush against the body, akin to the tight, close shot of a post-coital Santiago gazing lovingly at Miguel/the audience. The movement downwards and the unforgiving nature of the windstorm foreshadow the metaphysical being/not being that Santiago experiences as a magical-realist ghost that comes back to haunt Miguel, as the audience can infer through a literary imagination that he has descended to a spiritual purgatory.

The abrupt, yet to some extent foreshadowed, switch to the magical-realist aesthetic mode highlights the larger part of *Contracorriente*'s relatively short 100-minute running time. The switch in narrative mode can be read as what Mary Louise Pratt calls a "contact zone," or geographically delimited "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (4). The spectral mode in the film represents one such zone, where the queer male can come into visual contact with the spaces and systems of homophobia previously deemed off-limits by the spatial contract of heteronormativity. The film emphasizes the linkage between aesthetic mode and contact zone through Miguel's panic at seeing Santiago inside the village house. The first contact with magical realism is decentered by quick-moving shots of the three characters in the living room, of Miguel alone, and of Santiago and Mariela, as if the camera refuses to allow the viewer to completely identify the visual telos with the magical realist tradition. We are instead invited to situate the magical within the epistemology of the real in the film through the carefully constructed shots that emphasize that not all points of view share an experience of the contact zone. The aesthetic mode is unpacked by Miguel's initial incredulity of the spectral presence, quite unlike traditional

magical realism that normalizes the supernatural. In *Contracorriente*, instead, the two male protagonists struggle with the magical, refusing at first to acknowledge its existence, pushing the film further into inwatchability, as the viewer and the diegetic characters must negotiate a position in relation to the contact zone between the magical and the real.

Their perspective, however, evolves when they realize that the spectral permits a violation of the spatial contract, as Santiago openly interacts with Miguel within his house. It is within this aesthetic mode of contact that we can unearth an epistemological and ethical theorization of the queer in the film, permitting a “New” reading that actively juxtaposes systems and beliefs of difference with heteronormativity. The film moves the breach to other gendered spaces such as the church and the bar. Miguel is at first uncomfortable with the spectral presence of Santiago during Sunday service, but the film effectively uses aural strategies such as the meshing of the reading of non-homophobic scripture with full-body shots of Santiago standing amongst seated parishioners. The spatial framing of this scene emphasizes the queer body’s non-belonging to patriarchal religious systems, yet at the same time invites the reader to unpack the visual structure through the aural cue of non-prejudice, followed by Santiago sitting next to Miguel in a pew. The film effectively portrays the possibility of a non-heteronormative space, albeit through the non-realist trope, through a self-consciousness of the magical. In one of many nightly encounters in Miguel’s living room, Santiago expresses that he cannot stand being alone and that it is horrible to not exist. The paradox here, of course, is that Santiago has never *not* been alone in the village, as the villagers have always viewed him with suspicion. What Fuentes-León succeeds in posing is that it may be better to be an ostracized homosexual seeking acceptance within a spatially coded society than to simply not exist. There is an implicit call to make the queer visible and spoken in opposition to a culture of aural and visual silence.

Miguel’s anxiety of seeing Santiago in the public/out space is gradually alleviated as the two men reacclimatize themselves in an unfinished house at the periphery of the village. They accept the magical-realist aesthetic, creating a contact zone that permits an exploration of the spatiality of gender. Santiago proceeds to leave the confines of the open/closed space and invites Miguel to follow suit. He beckons him to come out, and when Miguel asks where, replies almost casually: “fuera pues.” The shot that captures this exchange is backgrounded by the fluid, haptic space of the ocean (as signifier of the queer), with Miguel located between the viewer and Santiago. The scopophilic gaze is directed towards the haptic water, asking both Miguel and the viewer to step out and to break the spatial contract of heteronormativity. There are frames within frames in this shot, akin to the earlier boat scenes, as the filmic image emphasizes a metanarrative of coming out from multiple spatial closets, resisting simplified Anglo-centric narratives of leaving the figurative closet. Even in a later scene when Mariela confronts Miguel about the paintings found in Santiago’s house, he asks her: “¿qué cuadro?,” evoking the multiple frames that Fuentes-León’s composition elicits in the viewer in understanding the matrix of Miguel’s gendered struggle with subjectivity. The framing of the coming-out experience in *Contracorriente*, instead, posits that the Latin American closet is a very different space, and as such, any epistemology of it or phenomenology of leaving it must be socioculturally sensitive.

The subsequent shot is of Miguel peering out from behind an unfinished wall, alternating with a medium shot of Santiago inviting him out, even going so far as to talk to

people who cannot see him. He exists on the outside of the metonymic house, though not really in a corporal sense, reflective of a broader cognitive dissonance between gay rights and homosexual movements in Latin America, both in relation to traditional structures of patriarchy and to Anglo-movements inspired by a greater visibility and “watchability.” Santiago, in fact, can only be *seen* in a spatial sense when he affirms that: “nadie me ve, huevón,” evocative of the homosexual’s absence within the heteronormative aesthetics of coitus evidenced in the homoerotic lovemaking scene, as homosexuality can only be seen, spoken, and worked through by the film and the audience within the magical mode of narrative. Santiago seems to affirm this disconnect when he affirms: “mejor así...afuera,” as soon as Miguel steps outside. The camera invites us to see the homosexual in a public space, but also asks us to feel the breach of the spatial contract through the haptic reading of magical realism as an unpacking agent of the visual image. The audience must therefore not take the men walking hand-in-hand through the village as a simple representation of how much easier and normalized an acceptance of homosexuality can be, but instead as a polysemantic exploration of systems and spaces of narration that permit such representation, exemplified by Santiago repeatedly stating: “nadie me ve.”

With that being said, however, it is equally fundamental to acknowledge that *Contracorriente* does not affirm a queering of all norms of patriarchy, as what is representative of acceptance is the ability to hold hands in public, just like all the other heterosexual couples. There is a subtle critique of the gay movement’s drive to share straight rights, as by doing so there is no real epistemological challenging of extant systems. There is, furthermore, no real queering of the norms of heterosexual structures, as the two men experience an intense emotive reaction at the birth of Miguel and Mariela’s son, reaffirming the value placed on procreation vis-à-vis sexuality as depicted in the opening shot of Mariela’s rising and falling belly. The resistance to completely do away with the aesthetics and structures of heteronormativity in the film may return to the director’s need to make a watchable film for the Latin American audience, though it remains highly inwatchable to the informed viewer who must unpack the magical-realist aesthetic mode behind the visual image.

The spatial and epistemological coming out of Miguel (from the closeted unfinished house) and Santiago (as a seen and unseen specter within the spaces of heterosexuality) allows the film to enter, albeit ephemerally, into a lighter tone, as the two men engage in the type of hijinks permitted when one is invisible. Even during these lighthearted scenes, Fuentes-León does not allow the viewer to completely disassociate the magical-realist aesthetic from an ethical exploration of the contact zone between queerness and heterosexuality. The film, for example, uses the typical caper of the invisible subject reading the cards of the other players during a poker game. This light-hearted moment, however, is subtly placed within a power system of contention, as Miguel wins a hand of poker against a bluffing member of the homophobic homosocial with a pair of queens. The simplicity of this detail is counteracted by the affective potential of the two queens as being capable of overpowering the homophobic within a previously outlined space of heteronormativity, albeit through the paradoxical visible/invisible narrative mode. The poker hand, furthermore, foreshadows Miguel’s coming out to the community, as he agrees to offer Santiago’s cadaver to the ocean, thereby allowing him to rest in peace.

The public offering of the body as a rite of passage from the living underlines the film’s espousal of magical realism as a way of narrating, as it emphasizes the mythopoetic

cultural exoticism of meshing indigenous and European belief systems. The director acknowledges this in the first offering made by Miguel of Carlos's body. The boat that takes him out to sea is adorned with purple flags, evocative of the North American symbol of the funerary service and not local ceremonies. Adrián Pérez Melgosa touches upon this facet of cinematic magical realism when he affirms that "all post-magical critiques share a tacit acknowledgement that the cosmopolitan gaze of magical realism can only function if, in the dynamic of looking and being looked at, there exists a certain degree of complicity from its object" (127-8). The film acknowledges an Anglo audience that associates the affective intensity of the color purple with the systemic death-rites of heteronormative religion, thereby underlining the complicity between Latin American and Anglo-centric gazes in undertaking an interrogation of the *maricón* in *Contracorriente*.

Miguel symbolically comes out to the village by offering Santiago, highlighting on the one hand the importance of the aesthetic mode and the disconnect between local and foreign epistemologies of the closet. On the other, he tells Mariela of his plans and she leaves him and their home, which loses its affective sense of place within the spatial contract of heterosexuality. The coming-out scene is not only visual, in the sense that the narrative is located in the scopophilic frame of the kitchen, but also haptic, as the audio repeats the rhythmic and tactile sound of waves, reminiscent of the close shot of a post-orgasmic Santiago in the beach. By collocating this aural cue with a framed visual of coming out, Fuentes-León invites the viewer to also feel the conflicting politics of Miguel's identity. He subsequently leaves the domestic space as the camera lingers over the doorframe, emphasizing his outing and also reminding the viewer of the power of spatiality vis-à-vis gender through the wedding portrait that hangs next to the door. The portrait is framed in an earlier scene as a fundamental referent in determining Miguel's sexual politics, as it hangs in the background behind a standing Miguel who is framed by a door. The shot invites the viewer to see him in a frame within frames, as he affirms to his suspecting wife that: "yo no soy así, te lo juro."

By leaving behind their marriage, Miguel is also severing himself as a subject from the topology of heteronormativity. The uncloseted man's decision to publicly acknowledge a relationship with Santiago is moreover problematized as he can only come out to his community in the symbolic liminality of death and within the spatial liminality of the ocean as he takes Santiago's body into deep water. It is interesting to note that they are never caught *in fraganti*, as the villagers only label Miguel as a homosexual after seeing the painted nude portrait, which, in turn, emphasizes the haptic process behind peeling away Santiago's thick and expressive brushstrokes to unearth sexual practices that are never seen by the audience and the diegetic characters. Reading Miguel's homosexuality in *Contracorriente* is really about touching the semantic and tactile bonds of desire that the painting evokes. The film ends with Santiago's body being offered to the sea, a final kiss between the two men, and Santiago's specter disappearing from the film, bringing full circle the narratological and spatial queering that *Contracorriente* embarks upon. The viewer is left with a dose of uncertainty and is asked to ponder whether it is the magic of the offering that liberates Santiago's ghost, or if it is the act of coming out by Miguel that liberates his own conscience, as prior to offering Santiago, Miguel has to first come out to his lover. He tells Santiago that he had found his body but had decided to leave it tied to a rock, as he enjoyed their magical-realist relationship that allowed him to be out while really being in. The film, therefore, does not suggest a clear path out of the Latin American

closet, but does succeed in problematizing its space and posing an alternate epistemology that underlines the sociocultural matrix that differentiates global gender expressions from a seemingly uniform norm.

The film's cover and poster material also deserve some final consideration, as Fuentes-León evokes the archetypical love triangle of *maricón* cinema that is perhaps best captured by Lombardi's *No se lo digas a nadie*. The interpretation of Bayly's novel ends with the homosexual members of the triangle agreeing to live a silenced relationship without public acknowledgement. *Contracorriente*, however, reframes this triangle, as Miguel actively comes out to Mariela, severing the visible and invisible lines that hold together the geometric shape in favor of a spatially undifferentiated paradigm, suggesting that the film, at least, queers this archetype. The cover shows Miguel, Mariela, and Santiago seated on the living room sofa, which has cleverly been relocated to the beach. The image is jarring in its juxtaposition of the domestic with the public, the inside with the outside, and the symbolic space of heteronormativity with the haptic symbolic space of queerness.

While *Contracorriente* cannot categorically be dialogued with New Queer Cinema, it does break with *maricón* representations of homosexuality in Latin America through the systemic queering of spaces and narrative modes. The film, however, does not exist in an aesthetic or political vacuum, and can be placed in a current trajectory inspired by Lucía Puenzo's *XXY* (2007) and *El niño pez* (2009) and Julia Solomonoff's *El último verano de Boyita* (2009). It is unsurprising that these films come from Argentine directors, as the country has produced some of the more progressive cinema from the region, and that there is a heavy non-Latin American production influence. Solomonoff's film, for example, is co-produced by Pedro Almodóvar's *El Deseo*, which has been an active player in Spanish-language Queer cinema from the 1980s onwards, whereas *Contracorriente* sources pan-European funding.

There are several points of contact within this corpus, including: the use of studied and static underwater shots that create a spatial and affective epistemology of otherness, and the movement away from urban centers (*El último verano de Boyita* takes place in the countryside, and Puenzo's films are in the Argentine periphery of Paraguay and Uruguay). Puenzo's *El niño pez* demonstrates an acute awareness of geography, as the two lesbian lovers kiss on top of a map depicting the border between Argentina and Paraguay. They seek to elope, away from the heteronormativity of Buenos Aires to the rural outside of Paraguay. The film, furthermore, intertwines the magical-realist paradigm through the spectral figure of a baby that swims in an underwater lake, queering the aesthetic mode, as bodies of water (which include the domestic bathtub) represent and situate the homoerotic scenes in the film. *XXY* places a similar symbolic charge in the fluidity of water (the sea, the lake, the rain) to spatially and affectively contextualize the intersexed subject, which also makes an appearance in Solomonoff's film. The former, however, centers the haptic intensity of the ocean as the aural cues of crashing waves permeate homoerotic scenes between two teenage subjects who resist gender identification, as Puenzo, like Fuentes-León, problematizes the notion of a top and bottom, decentering traditional *maricón* narratives. The film, furthermore, accentuates the spatial contract of heteronormativity through the juxtaposition of the ocean/coast with the domestic space, centering the subjects' queering in the non-urban and non-domestic, or as José Amicola affirms, in "esa tierra de nadie que parece ser un leitmotiv de la construcción." Perhaps the most important detail we can glean from these three other films is the scopic focus on

minority homosexual groups, leading to what can more accurately be described as *maricón(a)* films.<sup>[3]</sup> What these films succeed in posing to Fuentes-León's "Latin American audience" is the notion that gender is more about nature and less about nurture, thereby questioning socioculturally extant conceptions of Queerness. It is important to consider that a critical effect of the production of New Queer Cinema and its reception is the normalizing of queer subjectivities, bodies, practices, and epistemologies. That being said, we can begin to plant the seeds of a true dialogic corpus sourced from Latin America, which I tentatively name *New Maricón(a) Cinema*, as it underlines a series of films that illustrate an aesthetic and political outing of Latin American cinema onto the global stage with the hope of one day normalizing Queerness in a continent that has historically resisted the gendered other.

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[1] Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning* (1990), however, is a strong exception to this affirmation.

[2] We can intimate, here, a connection to Foster's reading of Marcelo Piñeyro's *Plata quemada*, where the only instances of male frontal nudity occur when El Nene makes love to Giselle, as the film "satisfies amply the conventions of heterosexual coupling" (137).

[3] We can contrast these films with what Foster argues is the lack of a queer focus in lesbian-themed Latin American films, as what Puenzo and Solomonoff succeed in doing is going beyond the simple depiction of lesbian lifestyles.



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