

‘La herida de un hombre no es una novedad’: gender, violence and performance in *Azul y no tan rosa*

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Abstract

Azul y no tan rosa (2012) was the first Venezuelan film to win the Goya for Best Spanish Language Foreign Film. It was also the first Venezuelan film to feature a kiss between two men, as well as an openly transsexual character. At the heart of the film is a scene which cross-cuts between transsexual Delirio performing the 1980s Venezuelan pop hit ‘No soy una señora’ and a vicious homophobic attack. This scene exemplifies the film’s preoccupation with the performance of gender, its denunciation of *machista* violence, and its call for acceptance of difference.

Keywords: Gender, violence, performance, Venezuela, homophobia

At a pivotal moment in *Azul y no tan rosa* (Ferrari, 2012),ⁱ Venezuela’s first Goya-winning film, transsexual performer Delirio Del Río sings ‘No soy una señora’, a song made famous by Eighties superstar Melissa Griffiths, known as the Venezuelan Madonna. Delirio is bathed in swirling blue and pink lights, reflecting the binary gender stereotypes referenced in the film’s title. Her performance to an adoring crowd in Club 69 is cross cut with the brutal murder of Fabrizio, the partner of the film’s protagonist Diego, in a homophobic attack outside the club. The scene therefore brings together the central concerns of the film: the performance of gender, the role of violence in performing masculinity, and the call for greater acceptance of difference.

Azul y no tan rosa is the writing and directorial debut from former telenovela star Miguel Ferrari. Released in 2012, it was described by newspaper *El Universal* (2014) as the first Venezuelan film to openly address issues of homosexuality and transsexuality, and features Venezuela’s first on-screen gay kiss. Vinodh Venkatesh (2016: 5) cites *Azul y no tan rosa*’s Best Latin American Film Goya win as testament to ‘an ever-burgeoning corpus of films, characters, tropes and bodies that decentre any sanctity previously afforded to the normative’. While Venkatesh is critical, however, of what he calls a ‘decidedly un-queer’ film, I argue that the strength of *Azul y no tan rosa* is precisely in it being a mainstream, entertainment film that speaks to wide audiences. The film centres on the reunion between photographer Diego and his son Armando, who has been living with his mother in Madrid for the past five years. When we first meet Diego, he has not come out to his family, who display homophobic attitudes through over-dinner chat. After Diego’s partner, Fabrizio, is beaten to death, Diego reconnects with Armando, helped by his friends Delirio and Perla Marina. Through the film, we also see Delirio face a lack of understanding or outright rejection of her identity as a transgender woman, and Perla Marina suffer from domestic abuse.

No soy una señora: the performance of gender

On multiple occasions throughout the film, Delirio feels she must explain herself, her transition, and how she is now a woman. Many people, including Diego’s parents, refuse to see her a woman, referring to her as *transformista*, meaning transvestite, a word that, according to Maria Ochoa (2008: 150), has associations with sex work and is often considered an insult. Through her powerful performance of ‘No soy una señora’ (‘I’m not a lady’), Delirio acknowledges the hurt caused by her critics, while also demonstrating a desire not to let these damage her sense of self-worth. She is shot from below, accentuating her strength and the image of her as a character to look up to.

Delirio is played by Hilda Abrahamz, who won Miss Venezuela in 1980. The beauty contest, according to Elisabeth Gackstetter Nichols (2016), symbolises the naturalisation of female beauty standards in Venezuela and the link between beauty and power for women. While off-stage we often see Delirio in jeans and understated make-up, in her performance at Club 69, she offers an exaggerated image of the sexualised woman – push-up bra, high heels, large curly hair, full make-up – all while repeatedly singing ‘No soy una señora’, urging the audience to question what it means to be a woman. As Judith Butler (1990: 187) argues, such exaggeration in drag performances destabilize gender norms by drawing attention to the ‘imitative structure of gender itself’.

La herida de un hombre: inflicting violence to perform masculinity

As Delirio sings of the emotional ‘herida de un hombre’ (‘wound by a man’), we witness very real violence perpetrated by men. The colour and warmth of the club is juxtaposed with the sombre, grey exterior, foreshadowing the brutality of the attack on Fabrizio by a gang of young men. They smash in Fabrizio’s car windows, drag him to the ground and beat him into a coma, inflicting injuries that will prove fatal. The effect of this attack on the viewer is heightened by cuts back to Diego, just metres away, smiling and dancing, unable to hear Fabrizio calling for help. The attack is unprovoked – Fabrizio has never met these young men before – but the viewer has previously seen them spray-painting ‘Mueran los maricones’ (‘Death to faggots’) outside the bar. The bar is in a quiet and secluded area, suggesting that these men have gone there specifically to act on their homophobia. While the scene aims to shock the audience, Delirio reminds us that ‘la herida de un hombre no es una novedad’ (‘a man’s wound is nothing new’): this attack is not unique. Between 2009 and the start of 2013, Acción Ciudadana Contra el SIDA recorded 99 anti-LGBT+ hate crimes, composed of 46 murders and 53 other types of aggression, including torture, inhuman and degrading treatment, arbitrary detention, and physical, verbal and psychological aggression (International Refugee Rights Initiative, n.d.). The number of recorded hate crimes increased from five in 2009 to 14 in the first half of 2013 (International Refugee Rights Initiative, n.d.), suggesting that little is being done to discourage such violence. Diana Cordero (2009) wrote in the socialist magazine *Aporrea* that the Bolivarian government was failing in its mission to promote human rights and inclusion by not doing enough to protect the LGBT+ population. In *Azul y no tan rosa*, we see the attack going unpunished until Diego is able to provide video evidence, which a worker at the bar had for a long time been too scared to release, highlighting the difficulty of bringing such attacks to justice.

The cross-cuts between the two scenes suggest that the attack is as much a performance of an exaggerated binary gender ideal as Delirio’s on-stage persona. As Ainhoa Vásquez Mejías (2016: 22) highlights in her study of *machismo*, aggression is considered a fundamental characteristic of a ‘real man’ in *machista* society. Consequently, killing becomes a way to prove one’s masculinity. Salvador Cruz (2011: 252) argues:

La acción de matar, como acto performativo, conlleva en sí mismo riesgo, embestida, violencia, amedrentamiento, certeza, firmeza, insensibilidad que, en términos semánticos, remiten a la hombría, a la virilidad, a la masculinidad.

(The action of killing, as a performative act, inherently carries risk, assault, violence, intimidation, certainty, firmness, insensitivity, which, in semantic terms, refer to manhood, virility, masculinity.)

Azul y no tan rosa is a statement against this link between violence and masculinity, portraying the attackers not as brave and virile, but as pathetic figures. In a later scene, when the gang

attack Diego and Armando, Delirio arrives in full make-up, a silk robe and high heels, pointing a gun. Calmly but forcefully, she calls out the gang, affirming that their violence is their way of compensating for a lack of confidence in their masculinity, and scares them away. Delirio draws strength and power from her costume of exaggerated female sensuality, challenging the equation of power with masculinity.

Sacrificio absurdo: normalised gender violence

As well as homophobic violence, *Azul y no tan rosa* highlights the prevalence of domestic violence resulting from the association between masculinity and violence. Femicide is the second biggest cause of violent death in Venezuela, with a 96% rate of impunity (*El Nacional*, 2016). The causes and consequences of domestic violence are explored through the character of Perla Marina, who we first meet with a black eye, inflicted by her partner Iván, but which she tries to blame on a traffic accident. Perla Marina leaves Iván, but returns to him, as she is accustomed to his violence. Pilar Blanco et al (2004) note:

Para muchas mujeres el hecho de estar sometidas a humillación, desprecio, abuso sexual y control de sus vidas por parte de sus parejas, forma parte de sus relaciones, sin tener conciencia de la dignidad y la igualdad a la que tienen derecho y sin evidenciar que están inmersas en relaciones destructivas.

(For many women, the fact of being subjected to humiliation, contempt, sexual abuse and control of their lives by their partners is part of their relationships, without being aware of the dignity and equality to which they are entitled and without showing that they are immersed in destructive relationships.)

At this early point in the film, Perla Marina still considers Iván's behaviour a normal part of a relationship. She sings along with the song about being mistreated by a man as a 'sacrificio absurdo' ('an absurd sacrifice'), without reflecting on her own situation. Binary gender stereotypes are deeply engrained in her environment. For example, when Perla Marina finds out that she is pregnant, her mother immediately wants to know the sex of the child to buy the correct colour blanket and to know whether or not to buy earrings. Iván's violence is portrayed as a performance of societal expectations, a way for him to assert his strength and dominance within the couple. Notably, he reacts violently when Armando calls Perla Marina, assuming she is being unfaithful. It is through spending time with Diego, Armando and Delirio that Perla Marina realises the flexibility of gender roles and, taking strength from these friends, finally stands up to Iván.

Una guerra que se hace infinita: countering daily discrimination

Azul y no tan rosa is a call for action not only against these explicit forms of violence, but also against the psychological harm inflicted by binary gender norms. As Fabrizio is beaten, we hear Delirio sing the words 'luchando y perdiendo en una guerra que se hace infinita' ('fighting and losing in an endless war'), a reminder of the daily struggle against pervasive discrimination across multiple levels of society. In the film, we see homophobia in the media, as a gay man is mocked on air by talk show host Estrellita; by the Church, as a priest (again on television) refers to homosexuals as 'depravados' ('depraved'); and in the family, as Fabrizio's father states he would rather his son would die than live with another man. *Azul y no tan rosa* attempts to counter these attitudes through normalisation. The trailer states, 'Diego es un chico como cualquier otro', 'sus amigos son gente normal' ('Diego is a guy like any other', 'his friends are normal people'). Delirio's performance of Melissa's hit song is part of this normalisation effort. The fall in oil prices and resulting devaluation of the Bolivar, on 18 February 1983 – a day

known as ‘Viernes Negro’ – had disastrous consequences on the Venezuelan middle classes, but also fomented a national music scene, giving opportunities for local performers, rather than importing music. Melissa was one of the first pop stars who Venezuelans could claim as their own. *No soy una señora*, released in 1983, was a considerable hit in Venezuela, performed by Melissa on programmes such as *Sábado Sensacional*. For viewers of the film, as for the characters, the song creates nostalgia. It is also extremely catchy, encouraging the audience to enjoy it along with the crowd on screen, to share a moment of communion. Simon Frith (2004) explains that ‘the experience of pop music is an experience of identity: in responding to a song, we are drawn haphazardly into emotional alliances with the performers and with the performers’ other fans’. *Azul y no tan rosa* aims to make audiences recognise themselves in Delirio, Diego, Perla Marina and their friends, to then empathise with the violence and discrimination they experience.

Conclusion

When Miguel Ferrari introduced *Azul y no tan rosa* at its London premier, he told a story about how, when he was at school, children were beaten for being left-handed, whereas today nobody cares which hand you use. His dream is for the same to be true of gender norms and sexuality. To that end, he set out to make a film that would entertain and engage audiences from all sections of society, a film with which everyone can identify, to break down barriers and stereotypes. The film played in Venezuelan cinemas for eight months, reaching more than 600,000 viewers and sparking discussion in national newspapers. Through Delirio’s performance of ‘No soy una señora’, the film draws attention to the multiple dangers of hegemonic masculinity and binary gender norms: homophobia, discrimination and domestic violence. The audience’s enjoyment of the performance makes witnessing the attack on Fabrizio all the more shocking and inspires greater empathy with the characters.

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ⁱ The title translates as 'Blue and Not So Pink', but the film was released in English as *My Straight Son*.