

OUVINDO O SILÊNCIO: FRUTOS PROIBIDOS EM "O CORPO" DE CLARICE LISPECTOR

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Resumo

Este artigo integra um projeto mais amplo para a publicação futura de um livro, cujo tema unificador comida/alimento orchestra-se na produção de crítica cultural. Nosso corpus está circunscrito ao conto de Clarice Lispector O corpo e sua versão cinematográfica homônima dirigida por José Antônio Garcia. A natureza intersemiótica e comparativista de nossa análise está ancorada em referenciais teóricos feministas contemporâneos e na crítica cultural lésbica/gay com ênfase especial na produção latino-americana. Procedemos à demonstração de que a asserção sofisticada por parte da escritora brasileira do desejo alternativo, em franca oposição à ditadura militar chauvinista dos anos 70 no Brasil, prova-se ainda altamente produtiva hoje. Se a repressão institucional não explica mais os constrangimentos impostos à crítica em relação à ordem patriarcal e burguesa, "corpos domesticados" exibem e deslocam interdições análogas à retratação cênica e à construção simbólica da alteridade, ironicamente em tempos em que proliferam discursos sobre pluralidade e diferenças.

Palavras-chave: *Crítica Feminista, Clarice Lispector, Linguagem Cinematográfica, Crítica Cultural.*

Abstract

This article integrates a larger book project, still unpublished, whose unifying theme of food is orchestrated to feed cultural criticism. Our corpus is circumscribed by Clarice Lispector's short story The Body and its homonymous film version, by José Antônio Garcia. The intersemiotic and comparative nature of our analysis is anchored on contemporary feminist theoretical frameworks and lesbian/gay critique of culture, with special emphasis on Latin American writing. We have proceeded to demonstrate that the Brazilian writer's sophisticated assertion of alternative desire in bare antagonism to the male-chauvinist Brazilian military dictatorship in the 70's turns out to be still highly productive. If institutional political repression can no longer account for the constraints imposed upon criticism to the patriarchal and bourgeois order, "domesticated bodies" display and displace analogous interdictions to scenic depiction and symbolic construction of otherness, ironically in days when discourses on the production of plurality

abound.

Key words: *Feminist Criticism, Clarice Lispector, Film Language, Cultural Criticism.*

I Introduction

*Listen to me. Listen to my silence. That, which I speak of, is never
what I speak but something else (...) Capture this other thing,
which in truth I speak of, since I am not allowed.*

(Clarice Lispector, 1973, p. 34)

In Brazil, the existence of a lesbian literary corpus created by women has not been properly acknowledged and recognized by academic critics. Cristina Ferreira Bailey-Pinto points out that the reason for this supposed lack of tradition is the taboo that, still, stigmatizes homosexual relations in Latin America and, consequentially, fosters a process of censorship – often internalized – that prevents the expression of lesbianism in literature by contemporary women writers. Pinto-Bailey (2002) further speculates that lesbian characters and erotic desire among women can on the one hand point to the author’s latent homosexuality or lead to the labeling of her writings as pornographic. Furthermore, in an early study on Brazilian gay literature, Sapê Grootendorst observed that:

In Brazil, “gay literature” is in general considered to be something forbidden, pornographic, in bad taste and of poor quality. It may serve emancipatory purposes, but in general, it belongs to the ghettos of a forbidden world (mimeo, p. 52).

In this paper, we would like to suggest an alternative, queer, point of entry for reading the acclaimed Brazilian author Clarice Lispector (1925-1977). We would like to analyze the significance of food and food metaphors in her 1974 short story, “O Corpo” [“The Body”] (Lispector, 1974) as a way to understand the construction/portrayal of a veiled field of signification for transgressive female desire. The additional comparative reading of the movie version by José Antônio Garcia provides us with important intersemiotic tools to dwell on what we consider to be a central issue in the original version. It is our suggestion that the “obscene” nature of lesbianism presses for a semantic shift in the film version, attenuating and reducing the transgressive force of the two women’s silence and resistance to heteronormativity. Throughout the entire (original) story, the processes of sharing, consuming, and preparing food are used to subvert the traditional submissive female gender role as homemaker and caregiver, concealing – while simultaneously creating

room for – women’s rebellious subjectivities and alternative worlds of forbidden female desires. In a historical place and time where and when “the lesbian exists in a vacuum of unreadability and unnamability both socially and sexually” (Manzor-Coats, 1994, p. xxii), the representation of female desire capable of sustaining itself – even when disguised/immersed in a world that denies its existence – takes on a subversive role, questioning concepts of “invisibility,” traditional patterns of submission and, thus, postulates alternative, liberating modes to imagine and live gender transgression in spite of oppressive structures of normalization.

2 The Vision

As we first look at “The Body,” by Clarice Lispector, we encounter Xavier: “A truculent and sanguine man. A very strong man” (Lispector, 1974, p. 23). “The Body” is the only short story in the 1974 collection *A Via Crucis do Corpo* that addresses directly the issue of female homosexuality. Since this issue is a “dangerous topic” and a forbidden fruit, Lispector purposefully and immediately throws her reader face to face with the minotaur-figure of the patriarch, Xavier – a man, who stands apart from the “sweet and perfumed” female household/universe he shares with his two wives. As the story develops, Xavier’s identity is constructed and revealed through his (unilateral) needs to sexually ingest and consume – in Portuguese Lispector uses the verb *comer*, to eat, which conveys a vulgar sexual connotation – his women: Carmen, Beatriz: “Everybody knew that Xavier was a bigamist” (Lispector, 1974, p. 23).

The structures and movements which give materiality to this *macho* body with its insatiable appetite, gestures, and (bad) behaviors follow a natural order of animalization and dominance directly opposed and contrary to the sharing complicity present in the relationship between the women Carmen and Beatriz. Thus, in order to create a real space for and to make possible the strong feelings shared by the women in this apparent patriarchal triangle, it would be necessary to dismember, i.e., deconstruct, the grotesque body of the *macho* who stands between them. Initially, the women attempted to carry on their relationship within the private sphere in double secrecy: their connection to the patriarch provided them a cover and protection from society’s scrutiny and while Xavier worked hard to provide “good food/*grandes comidas*” to the three, the women would lie in bed and make love to each other during the day. However,

as their union gained flesh [the presence of the patriarch in between the two women became unbearable and forced them to make drastic and dangerous decisions to remove him from their lives] they would not have killed [Xavier], if there had been another option (Lispector, 1974, p. 23).

As Marilyn Frye points out, “if a conceptual scheme excludes something, the standard vocabulary of those whose scheme it is will be adequate to the defining of a term which denotes it” (1983, p. 154). Therefore, it is not surprising that in “The Body” as well as in the Brazilian cultural context in the seventies, a lesbian

relationship could and would not be openly defined as so by society at large. In this story, as it is customary in all of Lispector's texts, the relationship between the female characters – in this case a lesbian relationship, we argue – is displaced to the realms of silence. As the author hinted at in the epigraph quoted above from *Água viva* (Lispector, 1973), what she says is never what she says in as much as the act of speaking is defined and constrained by patriarchal norms and limitations. It is then in a rhetorical space constructed by silence that the unspeakable/*o indizível* gains signification and materiality camouflaged and/or invisible to the dominant eye. It is left to the reader the task of listening to the silences that break away from the standard gender expectations for both the characters and the writer, who writes explicitly about female desire not directed to or controlled by males. It is in the silence that sits heavily on all relationships in the story – the triangle (Xavier, Carmen, Beatriz) and society, Xavier and the prostitute², Carmen and Beatriz – that the reality of the relationship is confirmed in all its fragility or (veiled) determination.

In the preface of the collection (which is written in an epistolary form, as if to confess to the reader and explain the stories to follow), Lispector unveils hints as to the nature of an imminent “danger” hidden deep in the text. As the narrative develops, she warns her reader and confident that within the textual labyrinth she, like Daedalus, constructed to hide away social perversities and problems, lies a monster that cannot be controlled or held back: “if there are dirty things in these stories, it is not my fault ... I am an honest woman” (Lispector, 1974, p. 7). Soon, she reveals that the “danger” from which honest people, like herself and her reader, must be protected is moral transgression of the customs and dogmas of hetero-patriarchal society:

Xavier was a bigamist: he lived with two women. Each night he had one. Sometimes the two of them the same night. The one left over would watch. One was not jealous of the other (Lispector, 1974, p. 23).

In the preface, the author advises the reader that given the “dangerous nature” of the issues raised in the collection, she would have to create a simulacrum to elude censorship and escape social reproaches. “People will stone me (...). So I told my editor: I will only publish this under a pseudo name” (Lispector, 1974, p. 7-8). However, faced with the impossibility of hiding behind a pen name, the author opted to escape to the field of silence and from that position – one of false submission – articulate in a veiled way those “things” and “indecencies,” which could compromise her status as an “honest woman.” Through a resistance tactic identified by Josefina Ludmer (1980) as the “tricks of the weak,” Lispector establishes a silent complicity with her reader, which grows parallel to the development of a secret lesbian love between the female characters expressed: 1) through the women's performance (or lack of) during the sexual attacks by Xavier and the pretense that they are satisfied by his *coitus/comida*. 2) And, metaphorically, through the preparation, sharing, and consumption of food amongst themselves. These silent games of complicity and simulacrum create the possibility for the materialization of another type of body, normally erased by the patriarchal

subject.

Like Carmen and Beatriz's kitchen, the entire story is filled with metaphors and an aroma of food and drinks, which points to sex or its "products." Verbs such as to eat or to drink are constantly used metaphorically as sexual acts: "Xavier had to work very hard to provide good food to all three" (Lispector, 1974, p. 24). In Portuguese the noun for food, *comida*, is homologous to the participle form of the verb to eat, which also carries a vulgar double sense, meaning either "eaten," "fucked," or "the fucked one" according to context. In accordance to traditional patriarchal roles (which reinforce male dominance and privilege), Xavier pays for, while the women prepare and serve him his food/*comida*. In this power-unbalanced relationship, the women are also the ones who are literally *comidas*/fucked. In that society, they cannot provide their own *comida*/food and each night they have to allow themselves to be consumed or *comidas*/fucked in order to satisfy Xavier's gastronomic desires. On a surface level, the women in the story assume an apparently passive position of resignation towards taking on the objectified and subaltern role imposed on them by the insatiable *macho*. However, though overt opposition to patriarchal dominance and objectification is absent, they reconceptualize and construct resistance in secrecy and silence: the two women slow cook a separate dish/relationship of their own, beyond the patriarch's field of vision and, by extension, control. Apparently, the triangle ate, or *comiam*, together, however without Xavier's knowledge Carmen and Beatriz sat at the table with him, but the women shared their food/*comida*, while watching, in disgust, Xavier satiate his bestial appetite:

That day, Sunday, they ate lunch at three in the afternoon. Beatriz, the voluptuous one, cooked for them. Xavier drank French wine. He ate a whole rotisserie by himself. The two women ate another rotisserie. The rotisseries were filled with raisin and plum stuffing – they were both moist and tasty (Lispector, 1974, p. 24).

3 Of Silence

Since it is impossible for a woman to speak not as a subaltern or a negative counterpart of man in the male dominated societies of the West as both post colonial and feminist scholars have shown us,³ let us, then, not speak of words, i.e. spoken words, fixed identities, or labeled sexualities. As we imagine and conceptualize resistance to compulsory heterosexuality and essentialist patriarchal gender system that erases multiplicity, normalizes human beings and classifies them into binary categories of straight or gay, let us turn our eyes to veiled possibilities cooked in slow fire under the master's surveilling eye, in "his own" kitchen. As we read Lispector's story, let's shift our eye from the center of the text/plot to the blank of the margins and the silences inscribed in between the words on the page, so that we may "capture that other thing [she has been forbidden to] speak of" (Lispector, 1973, p. 34). For, as many radical lesbian feminist scholars have argued, heterosexist discourse does not invest speech with materiality or society outside its limits and

boundaries, thus limiting all resistance to reform⁴. One is permitted to speak against the system, as long as the parameters of the speech-act originated from and is contained within that master system. According to this system of domination, “danger” does not stem from opposition or transgression of the values imposed by its logic-structure and order, but from the challenging of the system’s meaning/truth generating monopoly. This way Xavier’s transgression of social norms of marriage is tolerated and absorbed by the same morality system that condemns a loving relationship between two women: “Everybody knew that Xavier was a bigamist” (Lispector, 1974, p. 23).

And, although bigamy is a crime, no one did anything about it. On the other hand, even though lesbianism is not a crime in Brazil, it was not uncommon for women suspected of being lesbians to have their homes vandalized and/or to be run out of neighborhoods by “outraged citizens.” This much too common banishment is symbolized in the story when the two lesbians are not allowed to exist in Brazil (not even as punished outlaws, i.e. prisoners) and are exiled to Uruguay.

The fact that at the end of the story society (the police) opts to banish rather than imprison the women for their crime against patriarchy validates the theory that the real threat to the system of male domination is not transgression of patriarchal laws, but the challenging of the male-centric monopoly on inventing and imposing values on/for women. From this stance, then, it makes sense that transgressions, such as the unconventional relationship among Xavier, Carmen and Beatriz are tolerated and even subtly encouraged. Xavier often boasted that he did in the open what all others do in secrecy. The sexual anomaly and promiscuity of the triangular liaison might transgress moral rules of marriage; however, it does not challenge or threaten masculine hetero-supremacy. Thus, Lispector exposes a double standard when the same acceptance and tolerance are not extended to the relationship between the two women. For, as Adrienne Rich pointed out in her classic essay “Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence”:

Submission and the use of cruelty, if played out in heterosexual pairing, is sexually “normal,” while sensuality between women, including erotic mutuality and respect, is “queer,” “sick,” and either pornographic in itself or not very exciting (1980, p. 638).

Through this hetero patriarchal logic Carmen and Beatriz are “allowed,” or excused to make love to each other as long as the lovemaking takes place under the vigilant eye and control of the patriarch, whose ultimate voyeuristic pleasures the women are supposed to satisfy and cater for. However, the moment the women claim for themselves the active subject position of the verb “to love,” thus displacing the patriarch to a point beyond the margins of their universe, it becomes necessary to erase and/or to banish them from the hetero patriarchal field of signification and dominance before they implode its central structure.

In accordance to Ludmer's proposed understanding of subaltern agency under oppression, one can infer that it is, then, for survival reasons that Carmen and Beatriz are forced to cover up their relationship, metaphorically moving it from the "living room," where the privacy of the household is at times scrutinized by social visitors, into the domestic secrecy of the "kitchen." In other words, the lesbian relationship between the women is cooked in silence and behind public acknowledgement:

The days were long. Sometimes the two women would lie in bed. And, although they were **not** [our emphasis] homosexuals, the two would get excited and make love to each other (Lispector, 1974, p. 26).

Although Lispector could not speak openly of lesbianism without compromising her status as "an honest woman," the questions that echoes from the silence "that dare not speak its name" and cannot easily be stifled by phallogocentric discourse are: if they were **not** homosexuals, what were they? Girls just wanting to have fun? *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios/Women on the verge of a nervous breakdown?* If they were **not** homosexuals, why would Lispector tell us that Carmen and Beatriz would "make love" on a regular basis while with Xavier they simply "went to bed." There is another pertinent question that troubles the free-love, liberal reading of a happy triangular relationship mutually satisfying for all parties involved: once Xavier found out that the women had been making love to each other in his absence during the day, he demanded that they do it in his presence, so that he could voyeuristically participate. However, Lispector tells us that although the women daily watched Xavier have sex, or *comer*/eat the one he would choose for the night, they could not (or did they refuse to!?) make love to each other in his presence. Our argument runs that their lovemaking was a secret meal they refused to share! Lispector makes it very clear that it is only the intrusion of the patriarch which spoils the women's appetite for each other. That same night Xavier told them to have sex in order to satiate his voyeuristic and bestial hunger to devour the women with his eyes (*comê-las com os olhos*), "they went to bed successfully later" (Lispector, 1974, p. 26) after they were left alone and free from his command to perform.

4 Beyond the Border: loving without speaking

In the preface to the collection Lispector invites the reader to become her accomplice/confidant in this *via crucis* of "dangerous" narratives. As we read on, thus accepting the invitation to lose ourselves in a labyrinth of hidden transgressions, we become part of a veiling game that will displace the patriarchal body and create a space of multiplicity where the lesbian relationship between Carmen and Beatriz will materialize. Once we refocus our vision from center to the margins, from the obvious to the simulated, from the concrete to the implied, we notice that in "The Body" the presence and relevance of the *macho* body, personified by Xavier, dilutes diachronically and inversely proportionately to the materialization of the lesbian body, i.e. the relationship between Carmen and Beatriz. So as the love between the women solidifies and gains mass

which demands space, Xavier's presence becomes intolerable. His bad table manners, his bestial appetite, and his domineering presence in the relationship grew disproportional, like a cancer:

Xavier had bad table manners: he would eat with his hands, made noise as he chewed, and did not close his mouth to eat. Carmen, who was the more classy of the two, would feel nauseated and embarrassed (Lispector, 1974, p. 26).

As the narrative of this unconventional "marriage" develops the women slowly realize that they no longer need (maybe never ever needed) him. Xavier becomes marginalized and even problematic in their relationship. The loving space of domesticity becomes too small for three players. Xavier, who initially demanded for himself and occupied the center of the triad as the "eater"/ *o comedor*, was simply devoured by the women's silent love that dared not say its name:

How about Xavier? What should we do with him?
(...) Should we wait for him to die a natural death? Asked Beatriz. Carmen thought for a while and said:

I believe we should take action (Lispector, 1974, p. 30).

Action took the form of a funeral banquet that combined murder, potato salad and strong coffee freshly brewed to confirm, solidify, and toast the afterlife and immortality of the lesbian relation between the two women. In one last supper preparation Carmen and Beatriz kill Xavier and then cook for each other a mutually nourishing meal that will strengthen them to finish the process of ridding themselves of the patriarch's body, which lay in between them for so long:

[After eating the potato salad Beatriz had made for them] The two women went to the back yard and with two shovels they opened a tomb in the garden. And, in the darkness of night they carried the [*macho's*] body [depositing it in mother earth's oven]. They put the huge body in the tomb and covered it with moist and fragrant dirt. Then, they went back into the house, brewed a fresh pot of coffee to re-strengthen themselves (Lispector, 1974, p. 30).

This moment marks the turning point when Carmen and Beatriz stop being consumed and eaten/*comidas* to start cooking for themselves. Symbolically they stop being objects of patriarchal consumption and take on the subject role as agents of their own (lesbian) history.

As the lesbian relationship gains flesh, the "big and heavy" body of the patriarch that initially occupied the central referential point for all intimate relations in the short story is deconstructed and digested: The women's silent love devours the patriarch. Xavier leaves the scene mute, saying nothing, and thus making room for another space of signification, where the women will go on living their lives beyond the control

and borders of hetero-patriarchal society (without having to say the L-word). It is significant to point out that the murder of the patriarch was not discovered by the police; it was the women who took it upon themselves to confess their crime. This could metaphorically be read as a defiant act of coming out to the law, which would be either forced to socially recognize their existence in order to be able to punish their crime or let them escape patriarchal judgment and constraints (prison). Basically the “silent lesbians” turned the law of the father inside out and used its limitations for their own advantage and emancipation.

And now what? Said one of the policemen.

Now we have to arrest the two women.

Look, said the other policeman to the astonished secretary, the best thing to do is pretend nothing happened or else there will be a lot of problems, bureaucracy, and gossip.

You two, said the other policeman, pack your bags and go live in Montevideo I do not want any more trouble from you.

The two women replied: thank you, sir. And Xavier said nothing. After all there was nothing left to speak (Lispector, 1974, p. 32).

Thus, by the end of the story we return to silence (actually without ever leaving it). It is this subversive silence that Lispector offers as a banquet to her reader and the only nourishing food/*comida* in this lesbian story to counter the starvation, for a lesbian couple, of patriarchal domination. It is left to the reader the final task: to listen to the silences she speaks of even when she is not allowed to speak.

5 The Film’s Translation of Silence: spectator’s limits

As discussed, in Lispector’s short story silence translates, on the one hand, the interdiction to female/lesbian sexuality while, on the other hand, it ploughs the land for ultimate female transgression of that veto. In other words, if silence, as a result of silencing, suggests the obscene status of female pleasure in male-dominating society, “The Body” clearly voices silence as a signifying assertive practice. On the plot line, the story enhances the women’s trajectory from an original state of ignorance – sheer reification: body as food, food as commodity – to acknowledgement of autonomous desire within the domestic premises and to overt ostentation of their loud desire on the public scene and before the eyes of the Father.

We have already suggested, there is a substantial shift in that signification from the original short story to the film version. We understand that dislocation is primarily wrought by the flattening out of the tension found in the very “body”, understood as symbolic area of signification. To start out with the signifier “body” in the title, it stands for “living organism” and for “corpse”. Submissive bodies (devitalized corpses) give way

to triumphant bodies that desire a life of their own and are willing to pay whatever price is charged. The intertwining of life and death operated by food metaphors and sacrificial rituals in Lispector's story seem to undergo attenuation in Garcia's film version, in the sense that the development of a pathological portrayal of the two women is at play at the expense of their celebratory vindication.

5.1 Assertion of Female/Lesbian Desire: between normalization and deviation

Beginning at the end, we have defended that, on the plot level, the exile imposed on Beatriz and Carmen results from a positive visibility the two women gain in the process of self-discovery and assertion. As they expose Xavier's body/corpse to the law figures, they rescue their own bodies from commodification and their sexuality from obscenity. Producing a body/corpse – the male's – comes full circle with transforming the female's body/meal into their speaking body of desire. Xavier's heavy and dominating body is stabbed to death as a sacrificial offer in the females' rite of passage from commodities to desiring subjects. Significantly, the tools are the very kitchen knives the women used to feed their vegetating bodies in their oppressive/oppressed relation. While Lispector's story end with the scene in the back yard when they confess the crime and are sentenced to Garcia's film adds one last scene sequence at the airport. As Carmen and Beatriz board the plane, the viewers see the two women taking their seats in a row of three with a male passenger occupying the middle seat in between them. The eloquent silence of the trio and their significant exchange of sexually charged glances suggest a resolution of female/lesbian desire as either: 1) "lack" – they lack a husband/man, miss one, and look forward to a new one, or 2) "pathology" – murder is the inexorable part and parcel of their newly-found "crooked" way of living their desire. *Normalization strategies*, as the first hypothesis might suggest, are usual mechanisms that help evade consequential discussion of alternative sexualities. Confirmation of the norm by an initial acknowledgement of the exception empties full assertion of female/lesbian autonomous desire, as in the case in point. Visibility of non-hegemonic desire is granted *only* if it can be identified as a "stage" to be overcome before "normal" and celebrated desire is finally restored. The main rhetorical figure at stake here is *inoculation*. To resort to Barthes's expression, it "consists in admitting the accidental evil of a class-bound institution the better to conceal its principal evil. One immunizes the contents of the collective imagination by means of a small inoculation of acknowledged evil" (Barthes, 1972, p. 150). The basis for this teleological mythical horizon proves to be strongly theological in the sense that "the very end of myths is to immobilize the world: they must suggest and mimic a universal order which has fixated once and for all the hierarchy of possession" (Barthes, 1972, p. 155). If we embrace this hypothesis, we ought to admit that Carmen and Beatriz are now "redeemed" and can start from scratch. Redemption, again, involves the naturalization of the female body's reification and submission to male desire, whether in monogamous or bigamous relations.

Pathologizing strategies, on their turn, comprise mechanisms of overgeneralization by which a constellation of

character deformities are ascribed to the “pathological identity”; that is, those traits are accounted for as unquestionable results of female/lesbian sexuality. In the film version under examination, the cause-effect nexus between non-hegemonic sexuality and psychopathologies portrays Carmen and Beatriz as potential serial killers *because of* their lesbian desire. We are arguing the film, as opposed to the short story version, fosters a combination of the two sets of strategies – normalization and pathologizing – and, therefore, weakens Lispector’s eloquence of silence as potential room for female transgression of hegemonic sexuality. Let’s first examine how ambivalences in the story proper to the interplay gender/genre are spelled out in the film version.

5.2 Gender/Genre Conventions

If we look at Lispector’s Xavier’s “blindness” to *gender* perspectives, as already discussed, we shall surely find a provocative correlate, in the short story alone, in his failure to read *genre* determinations as well.⁵ In Lispector’s story, Xavier “did not understand the film (*Last tango in Paris*): he took it for an X-rated film. He did not realize that was the story of a desperate man” (Lispector, 1974, p. 35). “Not understanding” the film, as it is the case in the short story, costs Xavier his life, if *Last Tango* is taken as a metaphor for life at large. The narrator’s understatement on the male character’s constraints can be seen as an ironic or bitter comment on hostile and misguided *macho/military* reception and censorship to art in Brazil in the 70’s. We have already seen that Xavier is a poor reader and poor readers, or spectators, are usually incapable of broad textual perspectives and of comprehending nuances in both *gender* and *genre* horizons. Instead of approaching reading as active textual interlocutors, they remain unchanged receptacles, capable only of reproducing flat, mono-dimensional readings with predictable and linear outcomes.

5.3 Tragedy Announced: emancipation or expiation?

Film language develops a whole set of visual and verbal signs of premonitory nature, which symbolically bind characters’ action and development to a fate announced. A close up of the kitchen knife the women use to kill the poultry for dinner, a last supper’s icon on the dining room wall, and a *realejo* lottery, with a parrot drawing one’s fortune, are added to the “last tango” motif opening the film:

Xavier: Crazy girl! Shot the guy to death at the end.
[Later at the restaurant]

Xavier: Tonight is “last tango’s night”

Carmen: Is that a promise or a threat?
[Later in bed that same night]

Beatriz: Nobody killed you at the end. We have to thank God for such happiness!⁶

Unless we can conceive of transgression of genre/gender laws, the spectator, like the characters themselves, turn out to be sheer followers of pre-existing laws (created by literary imagination, humans, gods, or what forces may be). Is there no room for chance and agency?

5.4 Obscene Love Making and Scenic Sex: whose pleasure is it?

We have already discussed how Lispector's text elaborates distinctive accents between the relation the two women have with each other and with Xavier; eroticism is wrought in the former, but not in the later. It must be highlighted that Beatriz and Carmen's discovery of their own bodies is an authentic and organic process. Making love results from the women's autonomous desire and decision, not from the male's command. Whether love making happens in the presence of Xavier, for revenge for his lies, or behind his back depends on the women's newly-acquired body consciousness and erotic autonomy. The film's editing procedures, however, come to trouble this subtle and distinctive tension accomplished in the story, especially when Xavier's relation with a "terrific prostitute" comes into play. The conservative nature of the *ménage* is confirmed in the sense that Beatriz and Carmen unfold *one* and the same relation in two bodies: they are actually domestic and domesticated women who own their fetishistic existence to the complementary figure of the whore – their equally commodified other.

Beatriz and Carmen's lovemaking is suggested in a scene where Carmen kisses Beatriz's nape and, with their arms intertwined, the female partners toast to their erotic alliance. Neither their "successful lovemaking" behind Xavier's back nor their "frequent spontaneous" daily/domestic love making is portrayed in the film for the spectator. While one could argue that this "clean" aesthetic option is also extended to the elimination of the scenes Xavier has sex with his two wives, this argument does not hold true in face of the graphic ostentation of Xavier's orgasms with Monique, the prostitute. Two consequences derive from film language portraying the array of gender relations and roles: first, the celebration of heterosexual relations; female pleasure is exotic and obscene. It cannot be shown or seen. Second, the legitimation of male pleasure; visual exploitation of the female body as a commodity/food for male gaze (spectator's voyeuristic pleasure), is reiterated in the insertion of two *rendezvous* between Xavier and Monique, culminating with graphic sex scenes. The added scenes between Xavier and the prostitute in a nightclub environment with parading go-go girls and transvestites, meet the same voyeuristic demand.

Let's also push the quotation from the short story we have made a bit further, including a last telegraphic

comment:

The days were long. Sometimes the two women would lie in bed. And, although they were not homosexuals, the two would get excited and make love to each other. **Sad love** (Lispector, 1974, p. 26: emphasis added).

The visual deletion of Beatriz and Carmen's affective/erotic relation is reinforced by addition operations. Verbal accounts for their homoerotic involvement point in the opposite direction forged in the story. In the film version Carmen comments: "Sad is love without a man" (*O Corpo*, DVD, 1992). The ambiguity of the comment in Lispector's original occurs before the two women tell Xavier about their lovemaking, fact which might suggest other reasons for that sadness, including the obscene condition of their affair. In the film, the explicative comment occurs chronologically at the point when they find out about Xavier's "betrayal" and decide to take revenge. When taunted by Xavier about her desire for women, Beatriz replies "it's not about women, just Carmen" (*O Corpo*, DVD, 1992). Conversely, whereas they do refuse to go on "feeding" Xavier – both sexually and gastronomically – the female characters in the film version lose motivation to cook at all. Moved by external/male determinations, the female characters in the film version give up eating and loving. "Potato salad just for the two of us?" says Carmen (*O Corpo*, DVD, 1992). Compare that to Lispector's original version:

On the following day they told him they would not go on cooking for him any longer. He might as well see about it with the third woman.

The two women would cry sometimes and Beatriz fixed both a potato salad with mayo. In the afternoon they went to the movies. They dined out and came back home at midnight (Lispector, 1974, p. 39).

In Garcia's film, both practices/pleasures are then a prerogative of the male role. Given that food is a pervading and productive metaphor for gender roles in the story, eating and/or loving between females materialize in Lispector's version, through eloquent silences, but not in the film.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, one could claim that there is an overt critique of institutions like the bourgeois family, the Church and the police in the film version. For example, the sheriff is not interested in punishing criminals, but is personally concerned with undesirable extra work an investigation would demand on his part and with the equally undesirable commotion female homoerotic desire must spur in the city. However, a careful analysis of film language can unveil ideological layers on the discourse that help delude the more immediate textual discussion of female/lesbian desire into an array of visual and verbal signs that respond to and favor

male-centered and heterosexual expectations. Normalizing and pathologizing effects are obtained in the visual elision of the female homoerotic scenes and the verbal addition of explications, both of which make female/lesbian relations result from either a *lack* of social alternatives or a *distortion*, consonant with other symptoms of psychic anomaly. Finally, the reification of the *status quo* tends to prosper whenever the frontiers between *gender* and *genre* laws are naturalized, leaving little or no room for breaking textual limits.

Listening to silence requires, then, a lot more than aural attention. It calls for watching for the interplay between what is allowed in and exiled from the combination between verbal and visual enactment, especially when that combination derives from almost marginal, inaudible, micro signs of far-reaching symbolic effects.

Notes

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all English language quotes refer to our own unpublished translation of Lispector's short story "O Corpo"/"The Body," in Clarice Lispector, "O Corpo," in *A Via Crucis do Corpo* (São Paulo:Arte Nova, 1974).

2 At some point in the middle of the story, not satisfied with two women Xavier starts an affair with a prostitute unbeknownst to his two "wives."

3 See the works of Maria Mies, Gayatri Spivak, Trinh Min Ha, Sarah Hoagland, Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, Marilyn Frye, and others.

4 The U.S. lesbian philosopher Sarah Hoagland explains why radical, progressive change must go beyond mere reform of oppressive systems. Drawing on the work of Kathryn Pyne, Hoagland distinguishes between reform and revolution: "the task of moral reform ... is the preservation of values. But the aim of moral revolution is the creation of value" (1992, p. 24). Thus, although reforms might bring some change to a give system, its ultimate goal is to keep the system in place.

5 In Portuguese, the word *gênero* goes for both "genre" and "gender" (and even "genus"), which helps us develop the notion of readability of conventions as co-extensive to both sexual roles and literary horizons of expectations.

6 See *O Corpo*, DVD, directed by José Antônio Garcia, (1992; Brazil: Olympus Film Production: Embrafilme, 1992).

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Filmography

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"África, a de rios caudalosos, das selvas verdes e do ar limpo, fugia em direção a um deserto carbonizado. O continente mágico e antigo chorava em silêncio. Quando uma manta amarela e seca cobriu a vida, um grito de animal ferido, aterrador, se ouviu no mundo."
Africa, that of flowing rivers, green jungles and clean air, fled towards a charred desert. Follow Clarice Lispector and explore their bibliography from Amazon.com's Clarice Lispector Author Page. Aprendiendo a vivir es una selección de las crónicas de Clarice Lispector publicadas en el Jornal do Brasil entre septiembre de 1967 y diciembre de 1973. La Clarice que aquí encontramos es el ama de casa que se enfrenta a los problemas domésticos: el presupuesto familiar, la soper que hay que devolver, la mudez crónica del teléfono, la educación de los hijos