

**Subverting the Filmic I/Eye: A Cinematic Look at Marginalized Perspectives and
Alternative Sexualities in Sabina Berman's El bigote**

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Abstract

STELLA SOOJIN KIM: Subverting the Filmic I/Eye: A Cinematic Look at Marginalized Perspectives and Alternative Sexualities in Sabina Berman's El bigote
(Under the direction of Professor Alicia Rivero)

This investigation compares the gender roles and sexualities presented in Sabina Berman's El bigote to those in film, incorporating into the analysis ideas from theorists such as Laura Mulvey, Ann Kaplan, Luisa Valenzuela, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray to demonstrate that Berman subverts mainstream Hollywood filmic mechanisms such as the male gaze to undermine and question extant gender roles and sexualities.

**To my Parents, Gomo, and Jason
For their unconditional love and support**

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Introduction

“The future must no longer be determined by the past.” – Hélène Cixous

From the perspective of a woman living in a man’s world, to describe socially established gender roles as restrictive would be a trivialization. Men and women who deviate from socially established gender expectations are often ostracized, and although there has been some progress towards acceptance, in many countries, same-sex relationships are often still considered taboo. Because of this, through their literature, authors such as Sabina Berman are attempting to transform the perception of non-traditional gender roles and advance the acceptance of marginalized sexualities, both in the Spanish-speaking world and elsewhere.

In order to fill any gaps in existing knowledge regarding Berman and her work, however, it must be noted that while there exists an appreciable amount of literature on Berman’s work (most notably on her play Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda), as of yet, there has not been any literature analyzing the El bigote from a filmic perspective. Thus, this paper compares the gender roles and sexualities presented in El bigote by Sabina Berman to those in film, incorporating into the analysis ideas from theorists such as Laura Mulvey, Ann Kaplan, Luisa Valenzuela, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray to demonstrate that Berman subverts mainstream Hollywood filmic mechanisms to undermine and question extant gender roles and sexualities.

In El bigote, Berman undermines established gender roles by attributing traits and characteristics traditionally thought to be “masculine” to the female protagonist and vice-versa to the principal male character. For the reader¹ of the play, Berman pushes the question of gender to the forefront in the opening stage directions by summarily categorizing the protagonists—ÉL and ELLA—as “varón afeminado” and “mujer masculinoide” (Puro teatro 403). Consequently, before ÉL or ELLA have had the opportunity to articulate or embody a single word or action, Berman has already branded both characters with a stereotype. By thus labeling the protagonists and then withholding any immediate evidence regarding their said ‘masculinity’ or ‘effeminacy,’ Berman compels the reader of the text to generate an image of what an “effeminate” man or a “masculine” woman should look like and behave based entirely on his or her previous conceptions of gender.

Similarly, for the viewer of El bigote, because ÉL and ELLA have been presented to the audience in action and appearance—that is to say, the audience has had the opportunity to observe the dress and carriage of the characters—before either has uttered a syllable, the spectator is driven to make an evaluation of the characters based solely on the degree of “masculinity” or “femininity” evoked by their physical appearance and body language. In the case of both the reading and viewing audience, the structure of the play functions as a tool through which the reader or spectator is compelled to use his or her preconceived ideas of acceptable gender behavior as a standard against which to assess the degree of actual “masculinity” or “femininity” of the characters presented.

¹ It should be noted that there are two possible audiences to which the play may be directed: a viewing audience (the viewer or spectator), or a reading audience (the reader). The first term may be defined as an individual present at a staged performance of the work; the second, as any individual that reads the play—that is to say, as a text including stage directions and any additional explanations provided by the author that would not be apparent to an audience physically witnessing a staged production.

When both ÉL and ELLA fail to slide smoothly into the hegemonic “either/or” categories delineating male and female behavior and appearance (Shedd 27), the audience—both the reader of the script as well as the spectator of the play—is suddenly made aware of its own gender biases and assumptions. Not only does the ambiguous gender-bending behavior of the characters fall outside of the viewer/spectator’s scope of expectation, the discrepancy between what is expected and what actually occurs compels the audience to take a second glance at ÉL and ELLA. As Kirsten Nigro explains, “total gender dismantling ultimately must start from this kind of zero point, where there is no noise, nothing present from the past” (147). However, given that the context of men and women within society is one of constant (both conscious and unconscious) inculcation, Berman’s play also demonstrates that “notions of the masculine/feminine, or male/female, are so deeply engraved onto our cultural and mental maps that we must work with and through them in order to get rid of them” (Nigro 147). For both the viewer of the play and reader of the text, the shock of witnessing a situation entirely contradictory to what has been anticipated aims to suspend the audience’s preconceived gender notions so that, with biases aside, it can more impartially consider the non-traditional identities presented by the author.

To briefly summarize the events of the play, in El bigote, ÉL and ELLA, the two sole characters of the play, are married, but with a twist: they have an open relationship. While in theory, both agree that either is free to sleep with whomever he or she would like, in practice, it is ÉL that “siempre siempre” takes advantage of the arrangement, while ELLA “nunca nunca” (Puro teatro 406) does so, preferring instead to observe her husband’s conquests from afar. Although not explicitly stated, it is implied that the

reason why ELLA never makes use of their agreement is because she herself is attracted to the women with whom ÉL sleeps and prefers to vicariously experience her amorous conquests through her husband. Further complicating their situation is the “bigote” to which the title makes reference: an artificial mustache that the couple alternates use of as the situation necessitates: he to seduce women and she to ward off unsolicited male admirers.

The Filmic I/Eye: A Cinematic Approach to Berman’s El bigote

Given Berman’s history of questioning (and ridiculing) everything from “official” histories (as seen in her works Rompecabezas, Herejía, and Águila o sol) to Freudian psychoanalysis (Feliz nuevo siglo doktor Freud) to the fine division between reason and insanity (Amante de lo ajeno), it is not surprising that Berman uses the behavior of the characters in El bigote as a vehicle to call conventional gender roles into question. While at first glance, it is tempting to summarily dismiss ÉL and ELLA’s bickering and moustache-swapping as lighthearted entertainment, a closer analysis reveals that ELLA’s behavior, particularly her appropriation of the gaze, is significant on various levels. In El bigote, ELLA usurps the traditionally male gaze, thereby rejecting the female convention of passivity and appropriating for herself a construction that has been created by men for men. By attributing the male gaze to the female protagonist, Berman disputes established male/female conventions, simultaneously highlighting and undermining the scopophilic²

² Scopophilia is defined by Laura Mulvey as “circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at” (835).

active/passive gender divide (Mulvey 837), and, by doing so, challenges her audience to consider an alternative perspective.

In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey asserts that the eroticization of women in film gives evidence that the gaze of the camera is unequivocally both male and heterosexual. Because the majority of directors, playwrights, and producers are heterosexual men (Case 118), the works that they produce reflect the perspectives pertinent to their own lives. Consequently, the “lens” through which a spectator views a film is necessarily influenced by the director’s own perspective, which aligns the viewer—regardless of sex or sexual preference—with a male, heterosexual point of view.

According to Mulvey’s theory, which posits that women depicted in mainstream, Hollywood films are male constructions created exclusively to be looked at, the resultant problem is that, as recipients of this gaze, women are necessarily excluded from the subject position as “maker of meaning” (834) as well as from the perspective of the filmic I/Eye—that is, the referential viewpoint of the subject controlling the action of the film as well as the visual perspective that said individual imparts. Instead, women are relegated to a secondary, object position subordinate to the male scopophiliac, who, because of his alignment with the privileged terms “male” and “heterosexual,” is automatically incorporated into the hegemonic viewpoint of the filmic I/Eye. Furthermore, the notion of woman as “bearer of meaning” (Mulvey 834) is problematic because for her, the “meaning” in question is neither self-selected nor self-assigned; instead, like the gaze, the significance ascribed to the female image is an imposition by an external source without the collaboration or consent of the individual(s) involved.

In attempting to apply the male gaze theory to Berman's play, there are several important acknowledgements that must be made. First, as both a dramatist and a screenwriter, as well as having directed theatrical and cinematographic productions of her own work, it is evident that both film and theatre have had a profound influence on all of Berman's creations. In fact, in an interview with Emily Hind, when asked if the fusion of cinematographic and theatrical techniques used in her work is a conscious one, Berman replies: "A mí sí, me influyó mucho hacer cine" (137).

Similarly, the fluidity with which Berman moves back and forth between the two genres suggests that, for her, the boundary between theatre and film is merely an artificial division. In the same interview, as Berman responds to a question involving the changes that continue to take place in her works even after they have been published, she mentions that the latter changes in her play Muerte súbita came about as a result of comprehension problems due to ambiguities in the original text. What is curious, however, is that instead of using a theatric illustration to explain to the lead actor how the play should end, Berman opts instead for an explanation in filmic terms. "Si [esta obra] fuera cine," she says to the actor, "tendríamos una toma de ti desde arriba bajando las escaleras y cada vez nos iríamos más lejos para verte perder en la ciudad" (Hind 134). As can be seen, Berman's complete lack of hesitation in plunging precipitously from one genre to another confirms her attitude as to the fluid division between theatre and film.

Another element to consider in attempting a filmic approach to Berman's play is that while it is clear that Mulvey conceived of her observations involving the male gaze as "specific to film" (844), the two responses of the film spectator that she discusses in her essay are also applicable, though in a lesser degree, to the theatrical viewer. For

example, the disassociation of the viewer with the object onscreen in order to facilitate scopophilic pleasure (Mulvey 837) is applicable to observing participants of both genres; similarly, the contradicting necessity for the film spectator to at the same time identify with a figure within the film story can also be interpreted with a theatre audience in mind.

Reverting to Lacanian psychoanalysis, Mulvey observes that the moment in which a child recognizes its face in the mirror is extraordinarily crucial for the development of the ego. Because this “mirror phase occurs at a time when the child’s physical ambitions outstrip his motor capacity” (Mulvey 836), the child perceives the image seen in the mirror as a more complete expression of him or herself. Thus, in the same way that for the film spectator, the glamorous characteristics of the male movie star represent “the more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego conceived in the original moment of recognition in front of the mirror” (Mulvey 838), the theatre viewer can also identify with the ideal version of him or herself exhibited by the (male) protagonist onstage—the one whose gaze and actions carry power.

The numerous similarities between theatre and film likewise facilitate the implementation of film theory to theatre. Although to enumerate the similarities between the two genres is not possible in this project, it should suffice to say that both film and theatre involve performances by actors interpreting a script under the guidance of a director. Furthermore, given the fact that the mustache that ÉL and ELLA share is a costume—a prop—for both characters, it also calls into question “to what extent gender is makeup and make-believe” (Nigro 146). According to Erika Fischer-Lichte, “the costume points to the respective theatrical role played by its wearer and functions in this way as an important variable in the process that serves to establish or develop the identity

of this character” (85). In El bigote, the presence or absence of the mustache— an unmistakable symbol of “the almighty penis” (Nigro 147)—functions as a visual representation of the masculinity or femininity, respectively, of the character that employs it.

With these similarities in mind, the application of the male gaze theory specifically to El bigote is also pertinent because of the parallels between Berman’s plot and film. First, because neither ÉL nor the audience has any memory of ÉL’s encounter with the morena mentioned during ELLA’s account of the previous night, although the events have already transpired, the ignorance of both as to what actually happened acts metaphorically as a blank screen against which ELLA’s words construct a filmic account. Secondly, ELLA’s version of the evening follows the structure of a film in that, unlike in a typical theatrical production, which permits a variety of viewpoints (because the viewer seated in the center of the auditorium does not have the same perspective as the one seated in the far corner), ELLA’s point of view is the only perspective offered, thus mimicking the singular viewpoint of the filmic eye.

Taking It Back: ELLA’s Appropriation of the Gaze

Returning to the notion of the gaze, Mulvey explains that “there are three different looks associated with the cinema” (843): that of the camera recording, that of the audience watching the film, and the exchange of looks within the film structure among the characters themselves (843). Whereas in film, the “look” of the camera is the

perspective created through the actual angles and viewpoints employed by the person behind it, in Berman's work, this gaze is achieved through words. In it, ELLA's words function as the filmic eye, recording the events that are later played back to ÉL. However, because the action to which the words correspond have already occurred, ELLA reinterprets them as she relates the plot through her own perspective: the self-appointed raconteur of her husband's affair.

Because it is ELLA who relates the events back to her husband, his perspective of the evening corresponds directly to her interpretation of the same events. Much like the way that the filmic eye gives the appearance of objectivity while portraying a particular selection of images (since it is logistically impossible to include a thorough visual presentation of every person and object incorporated into a film), ELLA's version of the previous night also incorporates a selection of events that she, like the director of a film, has selected to relate to her husband.

As the screen presents the director's perspective, which, in turn, guides the audience's reception of the images, the version that ELLA relates to her husband is analogous to the perspective of the camera in that it is ELLA's selection of events, tinged by the interpretation that she herself wishes to convey, that functions as the standard for both her husband and for the audience. By permitting the reader/spectator to witness ELLA's version of the events, it is ELLA's perspective with which the audience aligns.

From the beginning of the play, the audience witnesses a struggle for control between the two protagonists, which, building momentum, culminates in ELLA's appropriation of the gaze for herself. As illustrated in the morning following his amorous encounter with the morena, when ÉL asks his wife why it is that he is wearing her

mustache, ÉL's inability to recall the events of the previous night gives way to ELLA's lucid description of it:

ELLA. Te lo presté anoche, ¿no recuerdas?

ÉL. ¿El bigote?

ELLA. Querías impresionar a la morena de la otra mesa y me lo pediste prestado.

La viste mientras cenábamos y, como la morena estaba sola, decidiste acercártele y prestarle tus atenciones. (Puro teatro 405)

Thus unable to either confirm or contradict ELLA's description of his evening, ÉL is forced to defer to the authority of ELLA's account.

When ÉL expresses disbelief regarding the brazenness of his behavior toward the morena, declaring "Ni siquiera recuerdo haber visto a una morena" (Puro teatro 405), ELLA makes use of the opportunity to highlight the visual authority of her own perspective, meticulously and voyeuristically describing the woman that ÉL has forgotten. By doing so, ELLA tightens her grasp on the newly appropriated gaze and cements the importance of her own account.

When ELLA again takes up the tale of ÉL's seduction, informing her husband that his unexpected self-confidence the previous evening impelled him to approach the morena, sit down, and call a waiter, all before he was even invited to do so, a timorous ÉL feebly opines: "Seguro que le pareció una impertinencia" (Puro teatro 407). As if completely disregarding ÉL's observation, however, ELLA summarily dismisses her husband's assessment and superimposes her judgment on his, once again verbally appropriating the gaze: "Qué va," she says. "Le encantó tu desenvoltura. Era un placer

mirarte. Qué elegancia en cada gesto. Qué ‘charm’ ‘mon chérie’. Ordenaste: ‘Champagne Brut del 52 y, ah, que los músicos toquen a Mendelssohn’” (407).

In a final attempt to assert his opinion and evade ELLA’s invalidation, a horrified ÉL exclaims: “¡Dios santo, qué cursi!” (407) in response to the news of his clichéd behavior. Smoothing over her husband’s interjection with another of her own, however, ELLA’s swift and conclusive “Qué acertado” (407) serves not only to discredit the importance of ÉL’s perspective, but establishes ELLA’s judgment as the definitive authority over the events witnessed.

Making It Sexy: ELLA’s Eroticization of the Gaze

Apart from the mere act of expropriation, however, ELLA’s usurpation of the male gaze poses several points of divergence from established gender roles. In the same vein of the questions that she raises about the very existence of these formulaic prototypes, ELLA likewise rejects the mere inversion of established hegemonic structures—one that would simply transplant woman from the object’s to the subject’s position (and conversely, the man from the subject’s to the object’s position), keeping established, heterosexual prejudices intact. Instead of simply inverting the existing hegemonic structures and focusing the newly appropriated gaze on a man, ELLA turns the gaze on a woman, thus entirely eliminating man from the construction, both as purveyor and recipient of the gaze.

As the events of the play unfold, the audience joins ÉL in his attempts to piece together the events of the previous night after having had “un whisky de más” (Puro teatro 403). Due to the fact that ÉL’s initial pursuits take place in a restaurant at which his wife is also present, although it is ambiguous as to whether her intimate accounts of the later events of the evening are fantasized or observed directly while acting as a voyeur to her husband, ELLA is nonetheless a first-hand witness to the preliminary events which ÉL fails to recall.³ However, when ÉL expresses his incredulity upon learning of his seduction of another woman, it is ELLA, not ÉL, who seizes the opportunity to make a gratuitous observation of the woman’s sexual appeal: “Iba con un vestido de chiffón blanco, escotado. Tenía los ojos verdes, los labios carnosos⁴... una piel apiñonada, color almendra más bien... Y su cabello azabache, largo, caía sobre sus hombros como... como un relámpago de seda negra” (Puro teatro 405).

In the same way that the scope of the camera denotes control over the viewer’s perspective, ELLA’s words function as a lens directing both the audience’s and her husband’s mental gaze. The suggestion of transparency to which the white chiffon alludes is further sensationalized by ELLA’s description of its neckline: “escotado.” Using her words as a directive lens, ELLA propels the audience’s gaze to the woman’s bare neck and décolleté, sensually fueling its perspective.

However, it is also interesting to note that ELLA deliberately avoids overtly sexualizing the morena. Despite her eroticization of her husband’s lover, ELLA’s description of the morena focuses primarily on the features of her face and minimizes the

³ While ELLA’s account raises the question of her reliability as a witness, because the later version of the evening that ÉL relates after “regaining” his memory corroborates, not contradicts, her own story, the audience is given no reason to distrust ELLA’s version of the events.

⁴ The ellipses seen here have not been added by the author, but appear as such in Berman’s text.

exposure of her body, thereby curtailing her value as a sexual object and preserving her identity. In contrast, ÉL's description excludes any reference to his lover's face, highlighting both his lover's anonymity and expendability.

In fact, ÉL's portrayal of his sexual encounter, seen later in the play as he "recuperates" his memory, emphasizes the morena as the recipient of his sexual advances. Surprisingly enough, for all the allegedly feminine characteristics he exhibits, in this aspect, ÉL's perspective seems perfectly aligned with that of a hegemonic, heterosexual male viewer. By calling attention to the morena in terms his pleasure and his sexual needs, ÉL succeeds in obliquely highlighting himself as the subject:

ÉL. Mis manos por su piel. (*Pausa*). Qué lenta piel, qué suave. Sus senos. Su vientre. (*Pausa*). Su pubis. Sus muslos. Su larga larga espalda temblando entre mis dedos. Su boca esperándome abierta y temblando. (*Pausa*). Dulce niña⁵ . . . La sentí desabotonar mi camisa... La dejé besar mi pecho... Le bajé el rostro... a mi sexo... Tómalo, dije. Sentí su mejilla húmeda contra el abdomen, su mano temblorosa, cálida, entrando entre mi ropa, buscando... buscando... encontrando... Lo besó. A mi sexo. ¡Lo besó! Lo besó. (*Silencio largo.*) La vergüenza... (412, emphasis added)

ÉL's repeated emphasis of the woman in relation to himself is even further eroticized by his overtly sexual references to body parts such as the breasts, womb, pubis, and thighs. Moreover, his dominant sexual attitude in relation to the morena's complaisant one seems to instantly reverse the alternative gender perceptions that Berman proposes.

⁵ With the exception of this ellipsis, which has been added by the author, the rest of the ellipses are reproduced as they appear in text.

ÉL's seemingly magnificent stretch as the owner of the gaze and the subject of the sexual exchange, however, comes to screeching halt with ELLA's question: "¿No tenías una erección?" (*Puro teatro* 412). The allusion to his impotence—a reference to "what many feminist scholars consider the most recognizable and most stereotypical gesture of feminist subversion" (Niebylski 171)—is indicated by the reference to his "vergüenza," the "*Silencio largo*" in the stage directions preceding the mention of his "shame," and the consequent ellipsis (seen in the text) in lieu of ÉL's response to ELLA's pointed question. As a result, contrary to the events indicated by ÉL's egocentric version of the evening, Berman implies that ÉL, his 'look,' and the desire that it carries are not only impotent, but because each has been stripped of their power, they are irrelevant as well.

From a psychoanalytic point of view, however, "the sexualization and objectification of women," as seen in ÉL's version of his sexual encounter, "is not simply for the purposes of eroticism" (Kaplan 31). Instead, this objectification is carried out expressly to "annihilate the threat that woman (as castrated and possessing a sinister genital organ) poses" (Kaplan 31). As Mulvey explains, one of the methods created by men as a coping mechanism for their discomfort with the implied castration evoked by the female figure onscreen is a complete denial of responsibility regarding the castration by fetishizing the image itself. In ÉL's case, the fragmentary nature in which he references the various erogenous parts of his lover's body functions similarly to close-ups of legs or the face seen in film, which, according to Mulvey, lend the narrative "a different mode of eroticism" (838). Because the fragmentary body looks flat, it destroys the verisimilitude of the filmic space, lending the figure a cut-out or iconic quality, which, in turn, renders the entire image less threatening (Mulvey 838). By converting his

lover into a fetish or a sexual icon—something pleasurable to look at—thereby effectively rendering her “reassuring rather than dangerous” (Mulvey 840), ÉL attempts to eliminate her threat.

It is interesting to note that through her appropriation of the gaze, ELLA counteracts her husband’s objectification and fragmentation of the morena by objectifying and fragmenting the morena on her own terms; she uses the same tools used by the patriarchy to subjugate women in order to subvert it. Whereas ÉL receives pleasure from fetishizing his lover in order to reduce his threat of castration, ELLA, who in symbolic terms has already been castrated, objectifies and fetishizes ÉL’s lover—not as a distraction, but to emphasize the pleasure in the process of looking itself.

All Talk and All Action: ELLA’s Appropriation of ÉL’s Language and Movement

In “Is the Gaze Male?”, Kaplan observes that recent films have sought to reverse traditionally male/female gender roles by rendering the male star the object of the female gaze. In these films, the male protagonist functions not only as the recipient of the gaze, but also as the explicit sexual object of a woman who controls the action of the film (29). However, As Jill Dolan explains, “simply trading gender positions isn’t as easy as it sounds . . . Women cannot simply express their subjectivity by objectifying men. A nude male in an objectified position remains an individual man, not necessarily a representative of the male gender class” (108). Furthermore, as Kaplan notes, in many

purportedly “feminist” films, despite the heroine’s sexual objectification of the male protagonist, “as female, her desire has no power” (29).

According to the way that El bigote is structured, given the fact that it is ÉL, not ELLA, who approaches the morena and he who initiates physical intimacy with her, it is possible to view ÉL’s desire as the compelling force of the tale. However, although ÉL is physically involved in the liaison, it is ELLA, working from one remove, who controls both the discourse and the action—two traditionally male-dominated aspects of scripts.

The notion of language as part of patriarchy is a common thread that unites the works of Hélène Cixous and Luisa Valenzuela. In “The Other Face of the Phallus,” in which Valenzuela adapts Cixous’ notions to Spanish American texts authored by women, Valenzuela asserts that men and women occupy different halves of the phallus and that women make up the nameless, uncultivated, “uncharted face of the phallus” (243). On the other, masculine, and supposedly civilized face, however, everything has a name: “each thing and each sentiment and each behavior” (Valenzuela 243), suggesting that language is a tool used by the patriarchy to categorize and subjugate the other, unnamed face.

Given that even the simple act of assigning a name assumes that the thing being named must first be defined (and, in turn, understood), upon closer inspection, the seemingly inoffensive process of naming is in fact patronizing because it accepts the natural superiority of the person imparting the name over the individual receiving it. Furthermore, as Valenzuela points out, because communication is necessary, women are compelled to use men’s names and as a result, “express men’s ideologies” (243).

Valenzuela explains: “Ever since the beginning of time we have been told by men what to do with our bodies, and chiefly with that portion of our bodies so full of menaces, so much like the other, hidden part: the mouth” (242). What she observes in Latin American women writers in response to this censorship is a feminine language that embraces women’s “fascination with the disgusting” (243-44)—a language in which images relating to mud, menstrual blood, miasma, and putrefaction abound. “There can be no censorship through the mouth of a woman,” she says, “so words can finally come out with all their strength, that same strength that has been obliterated from feminine speech ever since the notion of ‘lady’ was invented by men” (244-45).

While Berman’s ELLA stops short of delving into what Valenzuela terms “un regodeo en el asco” (243), she does evade censorship in her own way. By recognizing her attraction to other women, as seen at the very end of the play, she gives voice to her desires and passions, thus rejecting the role of woman as “The Mystery” and “*terra incognita*” (Valenzuela 242)—that is to say, as an entity entirely devoid of sexual desire.

Similarly, in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous also defines writing as a “phallogentric tradition” (283) that has been governed by a “libidinal and cultural” (283) economy in which women have been and continue to be repressed. In it, she advocates for the need for women to write about their bodies—bodies which house their sexualities, bodies which they have been conditioned to ignore and be ashamed of—thereby uniting their voices with the bodies that have been taken from them and, in the process, making their voices heard. According to Cixous, this new feminine writing should be characterized by not only by “woman’s *seizing* the occasion to speak” (284, emphasis in

the original), but also by woman's role as "the taker and initiator" of language (284), both of which are fulfilled by ELLA in Berman's play.

In El bigote, ÉL's initial inability to either confirm or deny ELLA's account of his romantic rendezvous necessitates that he renounce himself as the ultimate authority of his own tale. As a result, he abandons his claim to the discourse by virtue of his masculinity as the inherent keeper and guardian of language. Moreover, by looking to his wife to answer his question, "Y luego, ¿qué hice después? (Puro teatro 408), ÉL concedes his discursive power to ELLA and formally acknowledges her verbal authority.

Despite his acknowledgement of her discursive power, however, ÉL experiences various relapses and makes several attempts to wrest the conversation back from his wife by verbally seizing her tale. Not to be outdone, however, ELLA reacts with a similar strategy. In one instance, when ÉL is speaking, ELLA deliberately cuts him off and finishes, with her own words, the description that he has started (412). In another, when her husband attempts to once again align the audience's gaze with his own by describing the most intimate details of his sexual encounter, ELLA interrupts the diegesis⁶ of the play by asking about his erection, as mentioned earlier. Furthermore, ÉL's abrupt exit as to avoid further discussion of his impotence, as well as his response following reentry—"Te odié como nunca he odiado a nadie" (Puro teatro 413)—suggest that, just as he is powerless to control the action of the story by fulfilling his sexual desires with the morena, he is just as equally unable to control the discourse. Although Kaplan observes that in film, "men's desire naturally carries power" (29), given ÉL's impotence, his inability to control his story, and the fact that his desire is filtered through ELLA's perspective, ÉL is neither the sole owner of his desire nor does his desire carry authority.

⁶ A narrative or plot

ELLA not only verbally appropriates the plot of the story imbedded within the play, she also takes hold of the physical action as well. While Mulvey maintains that “the split between spectacle and narrative supports the man’s role as the active one of forwarding the story, making things happen” (838), ELLA’s actions indicate otherwise. In response to ÉL’s inquiry about what he did next, ELLA begins to act out the events witnessed, “*mimando su relato,*” according to the stage directions, “*de manera que actúe como si fuera él y él fuera la morena*” (Puro teatro 408). By seizing ÉL’s maneuvers, she emphasizes herself as the vicarious doer of her husband’s actions while effectively inverting their gender roles once again. Acting as ÉL while her husband acts the part of the morena, ELLA begins “*acariciándole [a ÉL] la espalda, los hombros, las cintura, las nalgas, por fin la entrepierna...*” (Puro teatro 408). ÉL is thus a stand-in for ELLA, who brings ELLA’s fantasies to their mutually desired fruition through her tactile foreplay with the morena (or ÉL acting as the morena).

ÉL and ELLA’s sudden role reversal and consequent role-play permit ELLA to objectify her husband as he has done to the morena. The exchange of power seen in ELLA’s role as ÉL and ÉL’s role as the morena enables ÉL to gain a first-hand experience of not just a general instance of female objectification by a member of the opposite sex, but insofar as ELLA’s interpretation stands true, how he himself, as a woman, would feel were he to be objectified by him(self), the man. Moreover, ELLA’s abrupt allusion to his impotence serves as a verbal castration, placing him in the same position of lack as Freud’s “castrated” woman that Irigaray critiques, while ÉL gazes at his own image of lack—that is to say, in the feminine position—on ELLA’s verbal screen.

Conversely, however, Kaplan perceptively notes that:

It is significant . . . when the man steps out of his traditional role as the one who controls the whole action, and when he is set up as sex object, the woman then takes on the “masculine” role as bearer of the gaze and initiator of the action. She nearly always loses her traditionally feminine characteristics in so doing – not those of attractiveness, but rather of kindness, humaneness, motherliness. She is now often cold, driving, ambitious, manipulating, just like the men whose position she has usurped. (29)

ELLA’s loss of “femininity” is precisely the dilemma seen in the exchange between ÉL and his wife, when he declares her “Bella y fría. Como una diosa de mármol” (Puro teatro 414). The caricature that Berman mockingly sketches, that of the inability of women to occupy a position of power while simultaneously maintaining their feminine characteristics, is doubly ironic when observed through ÉL’s eyes, because it is precisely his subjugation to his wife—his own lack of power—that not only endows him with his so-called “feminine” characteristics, but also functions as a turn-on. Not to be missed is Berman’s sardonic suggestion that if power indeed imparts inherently “masculine” characteristics, then woman’s un-power—that is to say, her lack (of power), both figuratively and in Freudian terms—is what defines her as woman. ÉL’s comment “Con el bigote eres de carne, pero aún peligrosa” (Puro teatro 414) suggests that because he, a man, derives identification as “male” from the possession of this power, the danger in yielding it to a woman is that it threatens his own definition of masculinity.

Needless to say, the summation of the problems presented by the inverted gender roles in El bigote, like the play itself, does not provide facile solutions, merely alternative perspectives for consideration. Suggesting, perhaps, that like the difficulties presented in the microcosm of Berman’s play, the problems confronted in the actual world have yet to be successfully resolved, Berman likewise omits any answers, opting instead for an

ambiguous finale. By doing so, she indicates the responsibility left to the audience to choose to either do something or to do nothing, but to recognize the viewer/spectator's claim as author of his/her story and determine an ending.

Changing the Default: A Female/Lesbian/Bi/Transgendered Perspective as the Standard Viewpoint

In her critique of male-centeredness, Sandra Bem defines androcentrism as “the privileging of male experience and the ‘otherizing’ of female experience” (41), and explains that while male and male experience are treated as the standard for human existence, female and female experience are seen as deviations from this standard. Furthermore, while man represents “both the positive and the neutral,” as demonstrated by the designation of the word “man” as inclusive for all of humanity, “woman represents only the negative” (Bem 41). The resultant problem is that not only is all of humanity male, so is man's perception of woman; instead of being perceived as an autonomous and self-determining entity, she is continuously subjugated by constantly being defined in relation to him.

Because the default perspective of the camera is both male and heterosexual, it is significant that Berman privileges ELLA's female and lesbian/bi/transgendered perspective. Although both ÉL and ELLA exemplify ambiguous and sometimes conflicting genders and sexual preferences, as anthropologist Walter L. Williams observes, gender should be seen “not in terms of either/or, opposite categories, but in

terms of various degrees along a continuum between masculine and feminine” (quoted in Shedd 27). Taking the idea of a gender continuum one step further, however, Berman proposes the idea of gender fluidity—a flexible, constantly-shifting gender identity encompassing characteristics of both that men and women may use or discard as they deem necessary. This idea of gender fluidity may be seen in ÉL and ELLA’s physical appearance, for although they are two different entities, the dividing line which separates them is blurred by their astounding similarity. Both “*llevan el pelo corto y pintado en un color rojo caoba [y] . . . Se parecen asombrosamente*” (Puro teatro 403). Furthermore, the ease with which both characters assume or discard the mustache demonstrates that gender identity, far from fitting neatly into the traditional static categories reinforced by society, are in fact dynamic and constantly subject to revision and modification.

While ELLA’s eroticized descriptions of her husband’s lover, her distaste for being approached by other men, and her apparent inability to utter the words “*me gustas porque eres un hombre*” (Puro teatro 411) to the man she has married do not prove her bi- or homosexuality, they do distance her from the standard default of male-female heterosexual desire. Furthermore, ELLA’s “*Esta noche no hay otra mujer que me tienta*” (Puro teatro 414), seen at the very end of the play, suggests that while it is ambiguous if her erotic descriptions of the morena are used as a turn-on for herself, her husband, or both, ELLA is indeed sexually attracted to other women. Similarly, ÉL’s “*Hoy me gustas tú más que ningún otro hombre*” (Puro teatro 414) indicates that despite his affair with and eroticization of the morena, ÉL also has homoerotic desires.

Although it is ambiguous whether or not she is actually interested in engaging in physical, lesbian sex with the morena beyond verbal or voyeuristic fantasies, even the

most modest hypotheses can corroborate ELLA's enjoyment of and desire for voyeuristic coitus, whether imagined or actual. It is interesting to note, however, that as a woman experiencing same-sex tendencies, ELLA herself seems relatively indifferent about her sexual inclinations. For example, when ÉL finally points out the inconsistencies in her behavior, ELLA responds with an unconcerned "Me contradigo, ¿qué quieres que haga? Soy una persona compleja" (Puro teatro 411).

In contrast to her apathy involving her behavior, when threatened with classification—that is to say, when ÉL makes direct allusion to her homosexuality—ELLA's attitude completely changes. In one instance, after a gratuitously erotic description of the morena, when ÉL jokingly asks his wife, "Y fue a mí quien le gustó?" (Puro teatro 405), ELLA's irritation is so evident that her husband is compelled to retract his words. In a similar incident, when ÉL asks his wife if she has noticed the way women look at her and smile when she wears the mustache, observing that ELLA thoroughly enjoys the attention, ELLA responds with a brusque "¿Qué estás insinuando?" (411). Failing to observe the warning signs in her loaded question, however, ÉL doggedly persists: "Pues a veces me das qué pensar. Sólo tienes ojos para las mujeres bellas. Me las señalas, me aconsejas cómo acercármeles..." (411). At this point, however, ELLA's scathing look prevents him from probing any further.

Returning to Mulvey's line of argumentation, for the heterosexual male spectator, the scopophilic pleasure obtained from viewing the eroticized female form—whether on stage or on screen—is a welcome and desirable effect. Nevertheless, Kaplan's theory would suggest that the pleasure derived from it is a mere by-product of the larger objective to which the viewer aspires—to distract himself from the anxiety of castration

evoked by the female image. As a result, although for a heterosexual man, visual pleasure is certainly gratifying, as a mere side-effect of a more pressing issue, it is rarely sought out or enjoyed solely as a means in itself.

In contrast, for the lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered spectator, scopophilic pleasure is multifariously gratifying. In “Desire Cloaked in a Trenchcoat,” Jill Dolan investigates the relationship between pornography, performance, and subjectivity, relating the observations of Debi Sundahl, a lesbian woman who started a women-only strip show at a lesbian bar in San Francisco. Describing the show, Sundahl writes: “The dancers loved performing for the all-female audiences because they had more freedom of expression. They were not limited to ultrafeminine acts only; they could be butch and dress in masculine attire” (quoted in Dolan 111). “In other words,” Dolan says, “if they wanted to, the performers could assume the subject position rather than objectifying themselves” (111). While the heterosexual female spectator is faced with two less-than-ideal options—align herself with the “active male” of the subject position and “symbolically participate in the female performer’s objectification” (Dolan 109), or identify with the objectified woman and, instead of facilitating the action, passively have things done to her—the lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered viewer of film or theatre is able to identify with both the scopophilic subject and object. Thus, just as she is able to derive pleasure from identifying herself with ELLA, she is likewise just as apt to identify with the morena, the object of the eroticized gaze. Moreover, as implied by ELLA’s transgendered point of view, for this viewer, the visual pleasure experienced upon observing an eroticized female is both a means and an end:

ELLA. Ser mujer no me impide disfrutar de la belleza de otra mujer.

Admiro todo lo bien logrado que cruza ante mis ojos. Una joya
hermosamente trabajada; un potro pura sangre... Y no necesito
llevármelos a mi casa para disfrutarlos. Lo bello lo contemplo desde
lejos... Lo dejo ser... (405-06).

What is interesting to note is the striking similarity between the models of male and female visual pleasure and the models of male and female physical pleasure as outlined by Luce Irigaray in “This Sex Which Is Not One.” Criticizing Freudian psychoanalysis, Irigaray asserts that “female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters” (23). “If the female sex organ is the clitoris, then it is really a penis, and one smaller and less powerful than the male version; if the female sex organ is the vagina, then it is passive, waiting to be filled with a penis” (Klages 106). Apart from the phallus being perceived as the standard against which the female sex is measured, in this system, the vagina, instead of being viewed as a complete and autonomous entity in and of itself, is seen as a lack; a castration. As Irigaray points out, the flaw within this structure is that woman’s sexuality is invariably defined in terms of its similarity to or divergence from man’s sexuality, never on its own terms.

The male model of pleasure exemplified in film and theatre illustrates that while visual pleasure is a desirable effect of man’s attempt to reduce his anxiety, it is infrequently sought out or enjoyed solely as a means in itself. As a consequence, according to Irigaray, male physical pleasure cannot be considered complete in itself, for it is always something else—a hand, a mouth, a body, language—that must stimulate him in order for man to experience pleasure (24).

In contrast, for women of various genders, the eroticization of the female form onstage and onscreen can be a pleasurable end in itself, since visual pleasure is neither a gratifying side-effect nor a by-product of the anxiety that men experience, but simply its own objective. As Irigaray explains, given its autonomous means of producing pleasure, the female sex—in both meanings of the word—can be considered of itself complete:

[Woman] touches herself in and of herself without any need for meditation, and before there is any way to distinguish activity from passivity. Woman ‘touches herself’ all the time, and moreover no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus, within herself, she is already two—but not divisible into one(s)—that caress each other. (24)

Consequently, as male visual pleasure mimics male physical pleasure and is dependent on an external source for fulfillment, female visual pleasure can also mirror female physical pleasure in its autonomy. In fact, these untraditional, female/independence and male/dependence binaries seen in models of pleasure are structures that are continually reinforced throughout *El bigote*. For example, while ÉL is a pusillanimous and obsequious creature who sustains his waning sense of self-worth with the meager affirmations that his wife throws his way (male/dependence), ELLA is a strong, dominant woman who comports herself independently of ÉL’s expectations of her (female/independence) and may also be a verbally sadistic dominatrix for his seeming masochism.

These male/female associations that Berman proposes can be clearly seen in continuous exchanges between the two protagonists: in one instance, ÉL expresses his insecurity at being the only person in the relationship who takes advantage of their open arrangement and suggests that he would feel much better if ELLA did the same. In another, ÉL illustrates an imperative need for ELLA’s approval by making a pitiable

mess of himself by apologizing to his wife. In turn, ELLA responds to her husband's need for both her endorsement and affirmation by rewarding him with sadistic praise: "Veo que eres débil. Inseguro. Que no puedes comportarte como una persona independiente de mí. Y aun así me encantas" (Puro teatro 412).

These female/independence, male/dependence binaries that Berman illustrates are in direct opposition to the traditional association of the male with the privileged term. That is to say, the customary association of "male" is with power, sexual prowess, and independence, particularly in the Spanish American gender roles of male machismo or female marianismo which Berman subverts.⁷ By reversing these associations, thereby bringing them to the forefront where they can be recognized, scrutinized, and questioned, Berman makes the audience aware of traditional prejudices involving gender, even by those who consider themselves immune from conventional biases.

Because the default perspective of the camera is both male and heterosexual, it is significant that Berman privileges ELLA's female and lesbian/bi/transgendered perspective. Despite ÉL's direct involvement in the affair, ELLA's appropriation of his gaze, his words, and his actions diminishes his importance. In the plot of the imbedded tale and of the play that frames it, ÉL, the once-protagonist of his story, is transformed into a mere character—indispensable, perhaps, but one who ultimately remains subordinate to the supreme authority of ELLA's filmic I/Eye.

⁷ For example, see Stevens' "Marianismo."

Conclusion

As discussed, Berman uses a variety of techniques similar to those used in film to undermine traditional perceptions of gender and sexualities. In El bigote, this subversion is illustrated in a constant struggle for power between ÉL and ELLA. ELLA's appropriation and eroticization of the male gaze, her expropriation of the traditionally male-dominated, patriarchal institutions of discourse and actions, her eroticization of another female, as well as her alignment with a female lesbian/bi/transgendered perspective, all work to undermine the conventional male spectator. However, as we can see, while El bigote does heighten awareness of the oppressive nature of prescribed gender identities, it clearly does not provide any answers. Rather, it simply aims to extricate the audience from its preconceived stereotypes, encouraging the viewer to take a second glance at traditional views of gender and sexuality.

Berman thus presents the hegemonic, heterosexual male viewer with two possibilities, both of which parody the original Hollywood cinema conundrum: to identify with ÉL, the male protagonist, and subjugate himself to the ELLA, the scopophilic I/Eye, or to align himself with ELLA, the female protagonist—not to exploit her as the object of his scopophilic pleasure, but this time, to align his gaze with hers to assume for himself her hegemony and power.

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